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Touching Paranoia: A Black Feminist Autoethnography On Race, Desire, And Erotic Massage

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Touching Paranoia: A Black Feminist Autoethnography On Race, Desire, And Erotic Massage

Abstract

Despite declarations of a “post-race” America, race and racism continue to pervade all aspects of American life and society—from our laws and language to our daily interactions and erotic desires. Drawing on five years of ethnographic research at a Black-owned adult massage studio in Los Angeles County, California, *Touching Paranoia* focuses on the experiences of erotic masseuses of color (Black, Latina, Filipina, and mixed-race) to examine the ways race and racism infiltrate our intimate encounters and fantasies, and how women of color—who exist at the intersection of race, gender, class, and the economy—navigate and negotiate prejudice in an industry and larger society built on their devaluation. As an underground racialized and gendered sexual marketplace in which conscious and unconscious racial bias is expressed as “personal preference” and discrimination is unrestrained by laws and political correctness, the author finds that the commercial sex industry serves as a fruitful space to explore how the legacy of slavery continues to haunt and shape our erotic lives—from our sexual preferences to our preoccupation with and paranoia about interracial relations and Black sexuality, which remains enveloped in racist mythologies, fantasies, and distortions. Responding to calls of Black feminist theorists such as Cathy Cohen and Evelyn Hammonds to expand discussions of Black women’s sexuality beyond assault, injury, and exploitation, the author adapts theories from feminism (with a focus on critical race feminism, Black feminisms, and sex-radical feminism), performance studies, sex and sexuality studies, and Marxism to create a new Black feminist interpretive framework—sex-radical Black feminist Marxist feminism—attentive not only to a history of racial trauma and oppression, but the complexities and contradictions of Black female sexuality, pleasure, and subjectivity. She also advocates Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as methodological and theoretical intervention in communication studies. Ultimately, *Touching Paranoia* maintains that the commercial sex industry is a critical site for the production of knowledge about race, sexuality, desire, paranoia, and the daily realities of women of color in “post-race” capitalist America, while also making the case for the erotic, touch, humor, and storytelling as potential sites of resistance, belonging, and increasing consciousness.

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TOUCHING PARANOIA: A BLACK FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON RACE, DESIRE, AND

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Jasmine Salters

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ABSTRACT

TOUCHING PARANOIA: A BLACK FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON RACE, DESIRE & EROTIC MASSAGE

Jasmine Salters

John L. Jackson, Jr.

Despite declarations of a “post-race” America, race and racism continue to pervade all aspects of American life and society—from our laws and language to our daily interactions and erotic desires. Drawing on five years of ethnographic research at a Black-owned adult massage studio in Los Angeles County, California, *Touching Paranoia* focuses on the experiences of erotic masseuses of color (Black, Latina, Filipina, and mixed-race) to examine the ways race and racism infiltrate our intimate encounters and fantasies, and how women of color—who exist at the intersection of race, gender, class, and the economy—navigate and negotiate prejudice in an industry and larger society built on their devaluation. As an underground racialized and gendered sexual marketplace in which conscious and unconscious racial bias is expressed as “personal preference” and discrimination is unrestrained by laws and political correctness, the author finds that the commercial sex industry serves as a fruitful space to explore how the legacy of slavery continues to haunt and shape our erotic lives—from our sexual preferences to our preoccupation with and paranoia about interracial relations and Black sexuality, which remains enveloped in racist mythologies, fantasies, and distortions. Responding to calls of Black feminist theorists such as Cathy Cohen and Evelyn Hammonds to expand discussions of Black women’s sexuality beyond assault, injury, and exploitation, the author adapts theories from feminism (with a focus on critical race feminism, Black feminisms, and sex-radical feminism), performance studies, sex and sexuality studies, and Marxism to create a new Black feminist interpretive framework—sex-radical Black feminist Marxist feminism—attentive not only to a history of racial trauma and oppression, but the complexities and contradictions of Black female sexuality, pleasure, and subjectivity. She also advocates Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as methodological and theoretical intervention in communication studies. Ultimately, *Touching Paranoia* maintains that the commercial sex industry is a critical site for the production of knowledge about race, sexuality,

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	III
INTRODUCTION	1
I. SING A BLACK GIRL’S SONG: A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO THE COMMERCIAL SEX INDUSTRY	1
Gentrification Of Commercial Sex (Aka Sex Work)	9
Black Sexuality, (Im)Morality, And Silence	12
The Erotic Life Of Racism And Paranoia	14
Constructing A Sex-Radical Black Feminist Marxist Framework	18
II. BLACK FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS FIXING METHODOLOGY IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES	24
ESSAYS	33
I. POLITRICKING: PERFORMING RACE, SEXUALITY, & RESPECTABILITY THROUGH LATE CAPITALISM	33
Politricken’: An Essay	35
II. TOUCH, DESIRE, AND RACIAL PARANOIA	48
Touching Paranoia: An Essay	49
Sorry, No Ghetto Or Black Guys: An Essay	60
III. DUALITY & THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF BLACK WOMANHOOD	72
Crooked Rooms, Locked Doors: An Essay	73
Excuse Me For Living: An Essay	83
IV. NAVIGATING AND NARRATING STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL: MANAGING EROTIC LABOR THROUGH FEMALE FRIENDSHIP, SPIRITUALITY, STORYTELLING, AND HUMOR	99
The Thing About Luck: An Essay	100
Snakes Are Mothers, Too: An Essay	107
P.M.S. (Post Massage Syndrome): An Essay	126
Laugh ‘Til It (Don’t) Hurt: An Essay	136
Un/Mirrored: An Essay	152
CONCLUSION	168
ENDNOTES	170

Most of us enter the scholarly world because we think we can do something important in the world. We are motivated to want to change things for the better. We want to be inspiring teachers and writers. And we want our work to have impact beyond the academy among persons who may find in what we have to say the same life-changing moment that we had reading that story so many years ago.

Unfortunately, most forms of academic writing fail to accomplish those goals. Think about it. When was the last time you read a study that truly moved you? This is not to say that traditional academic studies are worthless; it is to say that they seldom satisfy our needs as readers beyond providing useful information that we can draw on for our own work. That is no small thing, but neither should it become the only thing valued about academic prose.

We can choose to live larger than that. We can find new ways to use our research to reach a wider public audience and to have real impact in the world. And that choice has everything to do with the way we choose to write.”

—H. L. GOODALL, *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic admiration.

—MAYA ANGELOU, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

INTRODUCTION

I. SING A BLACK GIRL'S SONG: A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO THE COMMERCIAL SEX INDUSTRY

*somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl's song ...
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice¹*

—NTOZAKE SHANGE

*Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being
created.²*

—TONI MORRISON

There's an old billboard with actress Jennifer Love Hewitt lying naked across a massage table. Her nude body's partially covered by an animal-print blanket, a tennis bracelet glistens on her wrist, and hundred dollar bills are scattered around her. If you look closely, you can see a faceless man standing in the corner, buttoning his shirt. The tag line above Hewitt's arched back reads: A MOTHER WILL DO ANYTHING FOR HER FAMILY.³

The old billboard was promotion for Lifetime's 2010 original movie, *The Client List*, a torn-from-the-headlines made-for-TV movie based on a 2004 massage parlor scandal in Odessa, Texas.⁴ Hewitt stars as Sam Horton, a cash-strapped suburban wife and mother of three-turned-escort.⁵ With her home nearing foreclosure and disabled husband out of work, the former beauty queen and licensed masseuse returns to the workforce as a masseuse at a suburban day spa that doubles as a brothel.

Despite the scandalous storyline, the most risqué thing about *The Client List*—which drew in 3.9 million viewers and earned Hewitt a Golden Globe nomination⁶—is the advertising. The movie is hindered by a lackluster script, archetypal representations, and heavy-handed

moralizing—though I suppose this should come as little surprise from a network that produces movies with titles like *She's Too Young* and *Sexting in Suburbia* and boasts as its highest-rated and most-watched original movie *Amish Grace*—a story of grace and forgiveness following the 2006 Amish school shooting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania (I feel I should mention that the movie premiered on Palm Sunday in 2010). In the words of *Entertainment Weekly's* Ken Tucker, “In the manner of all such Lifetime productions, *The Client List* managed to offer cheap thrills (see Samantha in an array of revealing costumes!) while offering moral uplift (see Samantha get arrested, atone for her sins, and reconcile with her husband!).”⁷

When Sam first accepts the job, she is not yet aware that the other masseuses offer sexual services. Initially appalled, she rushes out of the spa, only to make the difficult moral choice (or so we are to believe) to take the job in order to provide for her family. On Sam's first day, we are introduced to her coworkers, a small group of white women who each take on a popular prostitute prototype.⁸ This includes Tanya, the beautiful, blond happy hooker who says things like “What can I say? I love sex. I'm getting paid to do something I love,” and Emma, the young, naïve, Bible-toting runaway, lured to the big city by promises of fame. According to their boss, Emma “won't do anything that's not mentioned in the Bible. Lucky for us, that's not all limiting.” When Sam asks Emma why she doesn't just go back home, Emma responds, “My family's Pentecostal. They're not real supportive of my Hollywood ambitions. I kind of liked being all rebellious at first, but now, I don't know. The money's good, but God's always watching, you know?”

Religious symbols abound. While driving home from work that afternoon, Sam has a conversation with the miniature angel statue sitting on her dashboard. “You see all that money right there?” she says. “That's just from one day. I mean, I got to worry about the kids and the bills and the house, right? I mean, I'm only gonna do it until we get ahead. I can do this.” Seconds later, she starts to look ill, pulls over, and throws up on the side of the road.

Despite Sam's uneasiness, she quickly becomes the most popular masseuse at the spa, known for her listening ear and marital advice. The quintessential “hooker with a heart of gold.” Within what seems like a few days, she earns thousands of dollars, pays off her mortgage, and

fills underneath her Christmas tree. This, however, cannot last if we are to go by Lifetime. As quickly as Sam begins thriving at work, she descends into the cable television version of hell on earth: picks up a cocaine habit from one of her clients, performs sexual favors for drugs, loses weight, becomes overly agitated, starts yelling at her kids, misses her son's soccer game, no longer wants to have sex with her husband.

"Part of the pleasure of the movies is stepping away from reality," writes Roxane Gay in an essay on Tyler Perry's morality plays-turned-box office hits. "One of Perry's most significant problems, however, is how he completely reconstructs reality to suit his purposes in ways that are utterly lacking artistic merit."⁹ Gay's words instantly brought to mind *The Client List*, which forgoes facts and imagination to promote its moralizing messages: a woman cannot be both wife/mother and prostitute, and women who stray from conventional notions of womanhood must be punished.

While the underground nature of the commercial sex industry makes it difficult to obtain precise statistics, countless studies and arrest data confirm that: most prostitutes enter the industry seeking economic survival,¹⁰ the majority of women in the industry are mothers (over 70%),¹¹ and though most prostitutes are white, most of those arrested are African American (who are seven times more likely than white women to be arrested).¹² Rather than consider these realities, like much of mainstream media, policy makers, evangelical Christians, and radical feminists, *The Client List* relies on a misleading and sensationalized story and enticing headlines to garner the public's interest. That is, it focuses on sex and white women to sell (I'm thinking here of the "white slavery" narratives that circulated during the late 18th and early 19th centuries of the innocent, young white women being kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery).¹³

In addition to focusing on young, white women, *The Client List* situates prostitution within the familiar framework of deficiency and conservative sexual morality, which positions prostitutes as both social deviants threatening the moral fiber of society and "fallen women" in need of moral rehabilitation. For instance, a Madonna/whore complex underlies the storyline, with a clear dichotomizing of "good" versus "bad" women. As the ultimate sinners, Sam and her co-workers

are pitted against the other women of the community and made local scapegoats, blamed for clients' infidelities and failing marriages.

In a discussion on the prostitute in popular film and the recurring theme of rescinding the fallen woman from prostitution, scholar Roberta Perkins writes, "More often than not the screen prostitute is a moral object lesson, usually punished for her sexual transgressions by being killed off, or redeemed by falling in love and living happily ever after in monogamous bliss."¹⁴ At the climax of this redemption narrative, Sam is arrested in a prostitution sting and sentenced to 30 days in jail in exchange for the names of 69 of her clients. Like a directorial trick taken straight from Tyler Perry's playbook, the scene in which Sam is fingerprinted and given her orange prison jumpsuit is juxtaposed with a Sunday morning church service. As Sam cries in her cell, the local pastor gives a speech on forgiveness. "What is forgiveness?" he asks. "Who deserves forgiveness? Are some things unforgivable? The bible tells us that forgiveness is essentially for life, frees us from past wrongs and gives us hope for the future."

Adding to the guilt and shame, Sam's mother, Cassie, is quick to express her disappointment after Sam's arrest. She tells her daughter: "I been up all night, thinking I just—well, just realizing that I must have raised you all wrong. ... I mean, I forgive you because you're my only child, but how could you do what you did with those men?" "For my family," Sam replies. "Well," Cassie continues, "it makes my skin crawl. Thank God your father's dead."

Once Sam is out on parole, a group of her former clients' wives show up at her home unannounced. Afraid that they're going to attack her, she offers a preemptive apology, only to discover that the women have come to her for sex advice. In addition to teaching the wives some bedroom tricks, Sam gets a job as a waitress, joins Narcotics Anonymous, goes back to school, and reconciles with her husband. Lifetime's version of a happy ending?

In April 2012, *The Client List* television series—a comedic drama adaptation of the movie—premiered to 2.8 million viewers, making it Lifetime's most watched series debut since 2009, and the second largest premiere viewership in five years.¹⁵ Like the film, the advertising was risqué, with billboards of Hewitt sitting in lingerie and lying down in a matching bra and panty set.

Hewitt returns for two seasons as Riley Parks, a single mother who takes a job in a spa after her husband abandons her and their two children. The show is split between Riley's home life and her workplace, The Rub of Sugarland, a suburban Texas day spa with "tasteful décor and a staff of wisecracking, gold-hearted Southern masseuse"¹⁶—most of whom provide sexual services to a select group of clients. Though initially disgusted by the idea of giving extras ("I am married with two kids," Riley tells her boss. "That is not my idea of a happy ending"), Riley begins taking clients off the list to support her children and middle-class lifestyle. Once again, Hewitt is persistently portrayed as the self-sacrificing mother and hooker with the heart of gold driven to prostitution to support her family. Once again, I found the storyline insulting. While I know the phrase "self-sacrifice" is subjective, it is most often used to refer to "a last resort and survival strategy in times of extreme economic hardship."¹⁷ Riley's difficult times, however, refer not to an inability to put food on the table or clothes on her children's backs, but a lack of income to pay off the mortgage on her three-bedroom home with a yard in the suburbs and gas-guzzling SUV in the driveway. Quite the first world struggle—and only representative of a small portion of the commercial sex industry. As noted by sex trade researcher Melissa Farley in "Getting Real Facts About Prostitution," "Here in the US, there are very vocal groups of people with my race and class (white, European-American, middle-class) who speak for all prostitutes, who say they like their 'job' and what they need is a union and a condom—but, in fact, the number of people in prostitution who are white, middle-class is extremely small. The vast majority of women in prostitution .. are in extreme poverty and they are women of color."¹⁸

Still, I must admit, the series was one of my guilty pleasures for a few weeks, offering moments of levity and glimpses into the daily lives of erotic masseuses—from the bursts of laughter to moments of confusion. I especially appreciated the portrayal of the emotional labor of commercial sex¹⁹: the therapy portion of sensual massage (though the show goes quite overboard with the masseuse-patient counseling sessions), the double lives the women lead, the toll the job takes on personal relationships, the camaraderie between the women.

The series also makes up for some of the film's overwhelming whiteness with the addition of Loretta Devine, who plays Rub owner Georgia Cummings, and Naturi Naughton, the

perpetually-smiling Southern belle turned masseuse Kendra. I enjoyed seeing faces like mine on the small screen, though, as it often goes when women of color are depicted in media, I found myself disappointed by the lack of depth. Lifetime continues to traffic in age-old stereotypes of Black womanhood. Georgia is caricatured as a modern-day Mammy, or, in the words of *New York Times*' Mike Hale, the "tart but jolly den mother and mama-san."²⁰ She is the sassy, churchgoing mother figure who spends most of her screen time taking care of her "girls" (mostly white employees) and Rub clients (mostly white men)—none of whom are hers. Kendra, according to her fiancé's best friend Grant, is just another gold-digger who got lucky. ("Kendra's smart, I'll give her that," Grant tells Riley, "scored big-time landing a Burnett." "It's not like that," Riley says, "she loves Bobby." "And I'm sure she also loves his parents' beach house," Grant responds, "not to mention the charge account at Neiman's.")

Additionally, though there are two Black women in the cast, there is still a noticeable whitewashing of difference. In the course of two seasons, there is never an acknowledgement of the simultaneous influences of race, gender, and class that position women of color in the commercial sex industry even further on the margins of society. There is no mention of the racial and gender inequality or wealth gap in the industry or the long history of sexual stereotypes that continue to impact the daily realities of women of color. Though focusing on porn actresses, scholar Mireille Miller-Young addresses the challenges faced by Black women in the industry in a *New York Times* essay (as well as several articles, book chapters, and her 2014 manuscript *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*.) She writes: "African-American women—and women and men of color in general—are paid half to three-quarters of what white actresses are paid. Like in other kinds of industries, they face prejudice and inequality in structural and interpersonal forms."²¹ Similarly, Tracy Abernathy of San Francisco's Street Survival Project proclaims, "If conditions are bad for white women, you can bet that they are twice as bad for women of color."²² "These conditions," according to former sex worker and activist Carol Leigh (also known as Scarlet Harlot), "include forced and economically coerced prostitution, discriminatory enforcement of laws, the denial of women's rights to control our bodies within

prostitution, the abuse and harassment by cops and johns- and abuse, discrimination and often alienation within families and communities.”²³

The disproportional levels of violence and discrimination are disregarded on the show. Instead, the danger, it seems, is inherent to the occupation itself—regardless of race or class. The women of the Rub are constantly worried about getting arrested or being exposed. A young white masseuse named Nikki (Laura-Leigh), a former stripper and community college student who is lured into the industry by an older sex trafficker, may or may not have been killed by her former pimp in the series finale. Riley’s home is broken into by a man looking for the Rub’s client list, which contains the names and detailed notes of all exclusive clients. Riley’s pregnant best friend Lacey Jean (Rebecca Field) is inside during the invasion and the intruder knocks her down as he runs outside. Lacey Jean loses her unborn child from the impact.

Varying levels of violence permeate the series, all working together to reaffirm the high-risk discourse of prostitution and rescue narrative promoted in the film. The series finale ends with Riley’s world literally and metaphorically exploding. She spends the tense final hours hunting down the Rub’s stolen client list with a newly-established prostitution and human trafficking task force hot on her trail. Riley’s brother-in-law—a member of the task force—finds out about her double life and warns his brother, Riley’s husband. Both brothers drive to the Rub where they find Riley running down the driveway in lingerie, a wig, stilettos, and a trench coat with blood all over her face as the Rub blows up behind her. The series ends with Riley’s final words to her husband and brother-in-law: “I can explain.”

Now my turn to explain.

When I was 22, I took a job at an adult massage studio in Los Angeles County, California. I’d responded to a Craigslist ad with the headline FAST CASH. NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED. An ad for body rub girls. I replied with the requested information—name, age, two to three photographs, phone number, experience, if any. I interviewed the next day, started training on Monday.

The Office—what we all called the four-room adult massage studio—was owned by a

Black woman named Rhonda, who hired mostly Black women masseuses. I didn't realize at the time that the Office was one of a kind—the only Black-owned studio in the area with mostly masseuses of color. The majority of massage parlors are predominately Asian, white, and Latina. According to the Urban Institute's 2014 study, "Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in Eight Major US Cities," Hispanic and Latino brothels have been rising in American cities. In San Diego, erotic massage parlors are run mostly by Asians, primarily Chinese, and brothels—especially migrant camp brothels—are run by Latino men. In Miami, brothels are primarily operated by Hispanic or Latino men and women. The women and girls involved are typically from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The industry, according to the *New York Post*, "has become a pipeline for new immigrants, and brought paid-for sex to Main Street America with a veneer of respectability, or at least mystery."¹ James Finckenauer, who co-authored the 2010 Rutgers study "Researching and Rethinking Sex Trafficking: The Movement of Chinese Women to Asia and the United States for Commercial Sex" with fellow professor Ko-lin Chin, notes that the growth has to do with the relative ease and security. "It's relatively safe," Finckenauer states. "And setting up a low-level massage parlor doesn't take a lot of capital. Plus there's a general interest in society at large in getting legitimate massages. So, crossing over into something more? It doesn't take a lot to bridge that gap."¹

These articles and studies barely touch on the discrimination within the industry. There is no mention that the majority of parlors, like strip clubs and hostess clubs, do not hire Black women. When I first began applying for jobs in the industry (waitress at a strip club, hostess at a hostess club, masseuse at adult massage studio), most people didn't return my calls. They said they were no longer hiring though they'd just posted a help-wanted ad. One owner said he'd hire me on a trial basis but only if he could lighten my photos. Others were more explicit in their racism, wrote in their ads disclaimers like NO BLACK WOMEN NEEDED and WHITE AND LIGHT SKIN LATINAS ONLY. Once I actually started working in the industry, the racism was both covert and overt. I, along with the other women I worked with, had to daily negotiate different types of racist sexism: lesser pay than white women, more dangerous working conditions,

employers and customers feeling liberated to speak their minds in the name of “personal preference” when selecting masseuses. (As scholar Sharon Patricia Holland asserts, what we call individual preference is never free from the influences of our lived racist culture, and “we can’t have our erotic life—a desiring life—without involving ourselves in the messy terrain of racist practice.”²⁴)

I didn’t know at the time that this was normal, that women of color in the commercial sex industry experience disproportional levels of discrimination: greater levels of violence and harassment, less opportunity, wage gaps. As noted by the anonymous woman interviewed in the article “Black Women and Prostitution,” “As a woman of color, I can not talk about sex work without talking about racism in the sex industry. I can not talk about sex work without talking about racism. I am a woman of color and do not have the privilege to ignore its impact on the job and in my life.”²⁵

I agree.

GENTRIFICATION OF COMMERCIAL SEX (AKA SEX WORK)

It was after I started graduate school in September of 2011 that I began researching the adult entertainment industry and erotic massage. I found that the majority of research on women of color in the industry focuses on the street sex market, drug abuse, and STD/HIV prevention, while white, middle-class, cisgendered women dominated discussions on sex work. “This is particularly problematic,” in the words of Heather Berg, “given the significance of race and place in informing sex workers’ experience as well as their (often unspoken) centrality in popular and legal discourses of sexual labor. It may also appear to be rather anachronistic given the vibrant sex-worker activist efforts both nationally and globally that address the intersections of sexual labor, class, race, and place in textured and exciting ways.”²⁶

From *The Client List* and *Girlfriend Experience* to recent memoirs such Jeannette Angell’s *Callgirl: Confessions of an Ivy League Lady of Pleasure*, Melissa Febos’ *Whip Smart: The True Story of a Secret Life*, and Diablo Cody’s *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, there has been a mainstreaming of the commercial sex industry and stigmatized sexual

practices—the majority of which focus on white middle class women. Most notably, in 2012, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the first installment of an erotic romance novel trilogy highlighting BDSM, topped the bestseller list around the world, selling over 125 million copies worldwide by June 2015. It has since been translated into 52 languages, set a record in the United Kingdom as the fastest-selling paperback of all time, and was made into a Hollywood film in 2015.

In the 2012 essay, “Full Disclosure: The Modern Sex Worker Memoir,” Shawna Kenney discusses the evolution of the modern sex-worker scribes, beginning Xaviera Hollander's 1971 breakout hit, *The Happy Hooker*, a Dutch woman's sex-positive tale describing her transition from Dutch Consulate secretary to high-paid New York prostitute. The best-seller sold 20 million copies, has been translated into 15 languages, and inspired several film adaptations. Since the release of *Happy Hooker*, there has been a dramatic rise in mass-market books revealing the inner lives of high-end escorts, strippers, and BDSM mistresses. These middle-class white women—whom Alex Kuczynski crowned the “sex worker literati” in a 2001 *New York Times* article—have appeared on bestseller lists, prestigious outlets such as NPR, CNN, and ABC's *The View*.

This is not only restricted to the mainstream media. As noted by Miller-Young, “Pornography and sexuality studies tend to neglect the history of black women's participation as laborers in the adult industries, and the role of race in structuring the terms of representation and political economy of pornography has generally been elided.”²⁷ In the past few decades, sex work literature in academia has started to move away from the “sex wars” debate and situate sexual commerce within its broader economic, social, and cultural context. For example, in *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex*, sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein contends that the transformation of sex work is reflective of larger social patterns, particularly the emergent perception of capitalism as increasingly rendering social life “artificial.” She suggests that in this increasingly artificial world, individuals yearn for authenticity, and thus, desire genuine interpersonal connections in addition to sexual relations—an exchange she coins “bounded authenticity.”²⁸ In *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss draws from interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco

Bay Area's pansexual BDSM scene to analyze the relationship between alternative and subversive sexualities and the larger capitalist culture. Weiss theorizes that the BDSM scene functions as a late-capitalist circuit, re-instantiating social norms and structures of inequality via performance.

This influx of literature over representative of cisgendered middle-class white women is part of what I refer to as the *gentrification of the commercial sex industry*. According to PBS, gentrification is “a general term for the arrival of wealthier people [read white] in an existing urban district [read Black, Latino, and lower-class white], a related increase in rents and property values, and changes in the district's character and culture.”²⁹ Similarly, the arrival of more middle class white women in the commercial sex industry (and its literature) has resulted in greater competition, changes in prices and services, and the further marginalizing of women of color, both on the ground and in the writing.

According to Melissa Gira Grant, author of *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, “Sex work has moved in doors, gentrified and privatized, and that's happened even more over the last few years.” Grant is referring to the years following the recession. Like any industry, the commercial sex industry is shaped by social, political, and economic forces, such as globalization, new technologies, specifically the Internet, and increases in demand. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with sex workers, clients, and police in San Francisco, Sweden, and the Netherlands, Bernstein finds that the redrawing of the boundaries between public and private life and intimacy and commerce in North America and Western Europe has transformed commercial sex.³⁰ The emotional labor and intimacy once associated with the private sphere has entered into transactional relationships. Male customers are, according to Bernstein, buying an “authentic emotional and physical connection”—what she calls “bounded authenticity”³¹—often from the new group of middle class, educated women who have entered the industry as an alternative to low-paid or tedious jobs in “the Internet boom years of the late 1990's.”³²

While these newer studies offer insight into the ways changing landscapes have affected the sex industry, there is still a lack of research on the ways these changes particularly affect women of color. This critique is epitomized by bell hooks, who argues that “white women who

dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state.”³³

It is only as of late that some critical attention has been given to the nuanced experiences of Black erotic laborers. In 2015, Mireille Miller-Young penned *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women, Sex Work and Pornography*, the first in-depth analysis of Black women’s representation and labor in pornographic media. She has also published several articles, essays, and book chapters on how black women in the adult entertainment industry navigate and negotiate the complex racialized and gendered marketplace and the representations of racialized sexuality in the pornography media industry.³⁴ In 2010, Siobhan Brooks authored *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*, an ethnography on Black and Latina erotic dancers. She finds that the racial and sexual hierarchies in the sex industry mirror existing hierarchies within other U.S. institutions, all of which place women of color at the bottom.³⁵ The same year, Cynthia M. Blair published *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-Of-The-Century Chicago* on Black women’s role in the underworld of the Chicago sex-industry in the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century, focusing on the relationship between commercial sex and Black women’s survival. Blair demonstrates that similar to their white counterparts, Black women in the commercial sex industry were “victims in some cases, but very often savvy strategists” navigating a racially charged economic system because they too had to “live anyhow.”³⁶ Blair also discusses the history of silence that has long overshadowed the voices and livelihood of Black women, a silence that I too had to break in order to write this dissertation.

BLACK SEXUALITY, (IM)MORALITY, AND SILENCE

Since the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, in an effort to combat historicized notions of Black inferiority and Black female hypersexuality, many African Americans, middle-class Black female activists in particular, have promoted what scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed a “politics of respectability”—a class-based politics deeply intertwined with Victorian notions of femininity and morality in which appropriate behavior and decorum provided a

defensive response to immoral images and corresponding civil and political inequalities.³⁷ Along with these bourgeois politics, Black women enacted a self-imposed tactic of protection, or a “culture of dissemblance.” According to Darlene Clark Hine, this coping mechanism included “behavior and attitudes...that created the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” and one of its main characteristics was silence as a means to avoid further stigmatization.³⁸ Resultantly, as Tricia Rose notes in *Longing To Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality & Intimacy*: “For fear that telling their stories will fulfill society’s implicit expectations about their sexuality, most Black women have retreated into silence.”³⁹

While research has been done within Black feminist theory on the factors that have produced and maintained understandings of Black female sexuality and representation, and the ways in which Black women have attempted to rewrite/right themselves back into social discourses,⁴ scholarship on Black female sexual autonomy remains underrepresented. In 1984, Hortense Spiller declared that “Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Evelyn Hammonds stated: “The restrictive, repressive and dangerous aspects of Black female sexuality has been emphasized by Black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed.”⁴¹ Fearful that they might reinforce stereotypes of Black female hypersexuality—a myth that continues to pervade American society—Black women scholars have either completely shied away from discussing Black women’s sexual labor or focused on the exploitation, objectification, and abuse of Black women’s bodies and sexualities.

In *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, political scientist Cathy Cohen refers to the process of exclusion of a subgroup within an already-marginalized community as secondary marginalization.⁴² Her theory asserts that during the practice of internal subdivision, typically the most vulnerable members of the group are stigmatized and subjected to symbolic “policing” by the group’s more privileged members—the privileged policing and constructing a collective group identity in an attempt to regulate behavior and adhere to dominant norms and politics of respectability). As a result, Cohen notes

that group leaders are likely to focus on issues not so obviously associated with the most vulnerable. For example, black leaders have continuously ignored controversial issues in “the black community” such as HIV and AIDS, instead condemning the behaviors of gays and intravenous drug users and focusing on issues that allow the black elite to maintain an air of social respectability (e.g., affirmative action).

This intra-racial politics of exclusion plays a key role in the experiences of many women of color in the commercial sex industry and our understandings of Black womanhood and sexuality. As Mireille Miller-Young notes in “Can the ho’s speak? Black sex workers and the politics of deviance, defiance and desire:

Because Black “ho’s” have been written out of discourses of “the Black community” or have been read as embodying the problems of contemporary Black womanhood, we are missing an opportunity to understand and illuminate the choices and self-articulations young Black women today are making about their sexualities. Moreover, we are glossing over the significance of capitalism and commodification as it defines all Black bodies as subaltern, from sex workers to service workers, entertainers to academics.⁴³

The goal of this dissertation is to continue the discussion on Black women in the commercial sex industry, who have, according to Miller-Young, “historically been forced to the margins of scholarship on pornography and sexuality, feminist debates about the function of pornography in relation to women’s sexual rights, and black feminist theory.”⁴⁴ Thus, I offer another counter-narrative to narrow, mainstream conceptions of prostitution and Black womanhood by foregrounding the experiences of erotic masseuses of color, who offer much insight into Black sexuality and womanhood, capitalism and commodification, and the ways that racism is embedded within desire.

Let me explain.

THE EROTIC LIFE OF RACISM AND PARANOIA

Though we live in a supposed post-race America, my experiences at the Office made it quite clear that race and racism remain deeply embedded in all aspects of life and society—from our institutions, laws, and language, to our daily interactions, individual and collective paranoia, and

erotic desires. From the businesses that refuse to hire dark-skinned women and the workers who refuse to take Black men as clients to the clients seeking an authentic Black experience, there are constant reminders of the ways racism and race continue to flourish in American society.

In *The Erotic Life of Racism*, a dense, innovative text on the relationship between race, racism, and desire, scholar Sharon Patricia Holland argues that in order to understand the everyday, quotidian practice of racism, we must move our discussions toward the territory of the erotic, the space of desire, as a site for “the strange and often violent modes of racist practice.”⁴⁵ Holland writes, “I am opening the door to a notion of the ‘erotic’ that over-steps the category of the autonomous so valued in queer theory so as to place the erotic—the personal and political dimension of desire—at the threshold of ideas about quotidian racist practice.”⁴⁶ Holland critiques the constant focus on moving “beyond” race,” asserting that “we are not done with slavery because we have yet to thoroughly investigate its psychic life.”⁴⁷

Samantha Elena Erkshine makes similar observations in *Slavery’s Echo in the Lives of Black Erotic Laborers: Racism, Stigma, and the Politics of Respectability*, a study on race and racism in the erotic dance industry. Erkshine argues that upscale gentleman’s clubs are microcosms of the “real” world. Classified as a “fantasy” world, these clubs perpetuate the racial hierarchies that the real world has attempted to repress in the post-civil rights era. She writes:

If one wants to see the true state of racism in the United States, the ongoing legacy of slavery, and the racialized whore stigma, one need only venture to an upscale gentleman’s club, where racism is unfettered, and where people are not forced to be “polite,” “politically correct,” or “racially sensitive” by mandates, laws, or corporate policies. The sex work industry—a supposed fantasy for the clientele—is where one can find insight into the real world, where people let their hair down, and do not feel pressured or the need to mind their manners.⁴⁸

Like Erkshine, I find that the erotic massage studio offers a less “polite” and more candid look at contemporary race relations and the relationship between race, racism, and desire in our current era of political correctness. As an underground racialized and gendered sexual marketplace in which unconscious and conscious racial biases go unfettered, the industry makes overt that which is said behind closed doors and left at the back of the tongue—what cultural anthropologist John L. Jackson refers to as de cardio racism. In *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended*

Consequences of Political Correctness, Jackson argues that while racial discrimination is no longer “thoroughly codified and sanctioned by the laws of the land” and segregation is illegal, racism still remains deeply embedded in American society, albeit underground. “Public tolerance doesn’t necessarily mean the absence of racism,” he writes, “and liberalism might just as likely be a cover for continued racial malice, racism with a poker face instead of a Klansman’s mask.

This new poker-faced paradigm of race relations, according to Jackson, is a type of “racism banned from the public sphere and reimagined as snug within the inaccessible hearts of other people.”⁴⁹ De cardio racism, he writes, “is about what the law can’t touch, what won’t be easily proved or disproved, what can’t be simply criminalized and deemed unconstitutional. It is racism that is most terrifying because it is hidden, secret, papered over with public niceties and politically correct jargon. It is a very powerful way that many Americans think about race today, as a subtle by-product of the ineluctably human fact that people feel things they’ll never admit.”⁵⁰

This type of racism, which is able to function fluidly while simultaneously hiding beneath personal beliefs, the demonization of public racism, and political correctness, according to Jackson, “has proven tragically effective at hiding racism, not just healing it,” and led to what he refers to as *racial paranoia*. Racial paranoia, he says, “isn’t about seeing racism where it doesn’t exist” but rather acts as an effective, if imperfect, “recognition that spotting racism at all these days demands new ways of seeing altogether,” and if we are to ever exorcise ourselves of our national racial demons, we must confront the deep-seated and often suppressed paranoia entrenched in our individual and collective social psyches, and deal with its resulting conflict and misunderstanding.⁵¹ I argue that the massage studio serves as a window to explore our suppressed racial demons and paranoia, as well as potential ways we might confront them.

Deconstructing The Erotic

Erotic (n.): comes from the Greek *erotikos*, meaning “caused by passionate love, referring to love,” which stems from *eros*, the term for sexual love, as well as the God of sexual love.

While indebted to the work of self-defined “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde, I stray from her conceptualization of the erotic—the “assertion of the life force of women; of that

creative energy empowered, the knowledge and sense of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives"⁵²—as the opposite of the pornographic. As she states in her oft-canonized essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," "[Pornography] is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."⁵³ In accordance with Lorde's claim that "the future of the earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference,"⁵⁴ I expand on her notion of the erotic—"a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane"⁵⁵—and commercial sex to offer a more nuanced understanding of Black sexuality and transactional intimacy within a late capitalist society. My work aligns with more contemporary scholars of race, gender, and sexuality whose work, in the words of Roderick Ferguson, "encourages us to confront Lorde's opposition with new insights in mind."⁵⁶ In the essay "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic,'" Ferguson offers the work of Siobhan Brooks and Mireille Miller-Young as examples of scholarship that advances views of pornography, adult entertainment, and erotic capital as complex and contradictory sites in which Black women live and work "within and against all the contemporary forms of exploitation, alienation, and objectification that make up life under advanced capitalism and sexualized racism."⁵⁷ Ferguson concludes:

Work by Miller-Young, Brooks, and other scholars asks us to openly revise pronouncements like the one in "Uses of the Erotic," revising them so that we can move toward an ethical contemplation that sees pornography and its contexts as legitimate places for a contemplative and critical existence and vision. Whereas Lorde evolved her theorizations of the erotic within the context of her work as a poetry editor, Brooks and Miller-Young point us to theorizations of the erotic that can reimagine the ethical possibilities of sex work, theorizations that arise from the working conditions of sex workers themselves. Such an articulation of the erotic would allow us to distill that portion of Lorde's definition that addresses the erotic as a "considered source of power and information."⁵⁸

Following the trajectory of Ferguson, Miller-Young, and Brooks, among others, in their refusals of one-dimensional analyses of the erotic—which Caroline Brown defines as "sexual hunger, romantic love, dangerous desire, sensual pleasure"⁵⁹—and the commercial sex industry, I revise the work of Lorde in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of commercial sex,

particularly erotic massage, and the ways erotic masseuses of color deal with racial hierarchies and other forms of racism and discrimination within the industry and society more generally.⁶⁰

CONSTRUCTING A SEX-RADICAL BLACK FEMINIST MARXIST FRAMEWORK

In *Prostitution and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Feeling*, Maggie O'Neill writes that there is a need for "a feminist socio-cultural analysis of prostitution in changing times" that uses "renewed methodologies" to understand the different contexts that can affect an informal economy like the commercial sex industry.⁶¹ Similarly, Laura Maria Agustin calls for a cultural studies approach that examines "commercial sex in its widest sense, examining its intersection with art, ethics, consumption, family life, entertainment, sport, economics, urban space, sexuality, tourism and criminality, not omitting issues of race, class, gender, identity and citizenship."⁶² In a discussion on the need to consider the diverse cultural contexts and conditions under which prostitution is performed, Caribbean feminist scholar Kamala Kempadoo claims that "the global sex trade cannot be simply reduced to one monolithic explanation of violence to women."⁶³ She argues that older feminist models, which see prostitution as an institution driven by patriarchy or an inherent act of violence against women, are "inadequate to capture the various histories, oppression, and experiences of women of color."⁶⁴

Kempadoo urges feminists to understand prostitution in terms of a broader range of social forces while maintaining that feminist theorizing about prostitution should avoid overlooking the agency of women of color by treating them as mere passive victims of oppression.⁶⁵ "The agency of Brown and Black women in prostitution has been avoided or overlooked," she writes, "and the perspectives arising from these experiences marginalized in dominant theoretical discourse on the global sex trade and prostitution. Our insights, knowledges, and understanding of sex work have been largely obscured or dominated by white radical feminist, neo-Marxist or Western socialist feminist inspired analyses that have been either incapable or unwilling to address the complexities of the lives of women of color."⁶⁶

In her canonized essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Rubin argues that sex acts and practices are placed within a "hierarchical system of

sexual value” wherein marital, heterosexual, reproductive sex—or “good” and “normal” sex—is placed at the top of the hierarchy while other sexual practices are negatively evaluated against the “norm.” She calls for a “radical theory of sex,” which, she states, “must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view. It must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution.”⁶⁷

In response to Kempadoo and Rubin’s call for a theory of sexuality that allows erotic variation and opens a theoretical space for prostitutes and other sexual others at the bottom of the erotic hierarchy—what she coins “radical sexual pluralism”—as well as calls of Black feminist theorists such as Cathy Cohen and Evelyn Hammonds to expand discussions of Black women’s sexuality beyond assault, injury, and exploitation, I have created a new Black feminist interpretive framework—*sex-radical Black feminist Marxist feminism*—attentive not only to a history of racial trauma and oppression, but the complexities and contradictions of Black female sexuality, pleasure, and subjectivity. “By concentrating on our multiple oppressions,” argues Deborah King, “scholarly descriptions have confounded our ability to discover and appreciate the way in which black women are not victims . . . [but] powerful and independent subjects.”¹ Evelyn Hammonds agrees: “The restrictive, repressive and dangerous aspects of Black female sexuality have been emphasized by Black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone underanalyzed.”¹

Adapting theories from feminism (with a focus on Black feminism(s) and sex-radical feminism), sex and sexuality studies, and Marxism, sex-radical Black feminist Marxist feminism adds an “intersectional”⁶⁸ approach to the study of commercial sex and expands upon Frantz Fanon’s assertion that “a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.”⁶⁹ I move beyond feminist “sex wars” debates,⁷⁰ which tend to polarize sex as either exploitative or empowering in order to “fuck with the greys” (to borrow from hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan) and observe the ways in which Black women—as well as other women of color—are uniquely affected late capitalism. In *When Chickenheads Come Home to*

Roost, Morgan grapples with her love of hip-hop, which at times feels contradictory to her feminist politics. She writes:

In short, I needed a feminism brace enough to fuck with the grays. And this was not my foremother's feminism. Ironically, reaping the benefits of our foremothers' struggle is precisely what makes their brand of feminism so hard to embrace. The "victim"(read women) "oppressor"(read men) model that seems to dominate so much of contemporary discourse (both black and white), denies the very existence of who we are.⁷¹

Black Feminism(s)

Like Morgan, I believe it is time to move beyond Black feminism's sexual conservatism and the polarized feminist ideological approach to prostitution—often called the "sex wars"—that tends to view commercial sex within one of two reductive ideological camps: oppression or empowerment.⁷² Black feminist theories overwhelmingly align with anti-pornography and anti-prostitution feminists, viewing prostitution as inherently exploitative to women, particularly black women, as it continues a long-standing narrative of Black female objectification, sexual violence, and exploitation.⁷³ Patricia Hill Collins, for example, positions prostitution at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the economy. She contends that commercial sex represents the exploitation of Black women's sexuality for economic purposes, and implies to the "White boys" that all Black women can be bought. "The creation of Jezebel, the image of the sexually denigrated Black woman, has been vital in sustaining a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression," Collins writes. "Exploring how the image of the African-American woman as prostitute has been used by each system of oppression illustrates how sexuality links the three systems. But Black women's treatment also demonstrates how manipulating sexuality has been essential to the political economy of domination within each system and across all three."⁷⁴

While such claims insist on the importance of race and history in the representation and treatment of Black women, such conceptions of prostitution fail to adequately address several critical questions concerning the complexities of choice and coercion, the sociocultural context

that leads women to the industry, and the pleasure and empowerment some women find in the adult entertainment industry. As Miller-Young observes:

if we only focus on how some representations are injurious and damaging to our sense of progress or integrity, we might miss the unknowability, ambiguity, and creativity of black women's dynamic sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures. This is not to discount in any way the structural issues of sexism and violence as they are reproduced constantly in pornography, the sex industry, or hip-hop; it is to propose that we take seriously how and why black people are finding their own legibility in these forms, and how they fashion themselves through and against hypersexuality and deviance. I'm suggesting that even though black women are stereotyped, and indeed in many ways mistreated, this does not mean that we should call into question their power for sexual choice or autonomy as they participate in the sexual economy. And if we do, do we not risk denying them the very agency we seek to provide?

Sex-Radical Feminism

Shifting away from liberal and radical feminist discourses of sexuality and prostitution that focus on women's oppression and danger, sex radical feminists theorize sexuality as constructed within dominant culture "without being fully determined by it."⁷⁵ Taking into account notions of choice, pleasure, desire, and women's economic and social conditions, sex-radical feminism enables a more complex reading of sexuality and sex work that allows for a simultaneous exploration of women's agency and subjecthood, and the material conditions of their labor. Discussing the necessity of examining the complexities of women's experiences, feminist scholar Danielle Egan notes in *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love: The Relationships Between Exotic Dancers and Their Regulars*, "To attend to women's various experiences is not to deny that exploitation and violence do occur, rather it acknowledges that sex work is not a flat or unitary experience."⁷⁶ Egan goes on to quote filmmaker and teacher Vicky Funari, writing, "Sex workers each have their own 'reasons for working, [their] own responses of boredom, pleasure, power, and/or trauma, [their]

own ideas about the work and [their] place in it. This work can be oppression or freedom; just another assembly-line job; an artistic act that also pays well; comic relief from the street realities; or healing social work for an alienated culture.”⁷⁷

In foregrounding the importance of contradictions and circumstance, sex-radical feminists challenge feminism to develop politics that open up sexual possibility rather than condemning particular sexual practices. As feminist scholar Amber Hollibaugh asserts: “[f]eminism cannot be the new voice of morality and virtue, leaving behind everyone whose class, race, and desires never fit comfortably into a straight, white, male (or female) world Instead of pushing our movement further to the right, we should be attempting to create a viable sexual future and a movement powerful enough to defend us simultaneously against sexual abuse.”⁷⁸

Marxist Feminism

The traditional Marxist position on prostitution stems from Karl Marx’s statement that “prostitution is only the specific expression of the universal prostitution of the worker.”⁷⁹ Marxist feminists, equating labor with commodified sexuality, liken the prostitute to the proletariat worker, both actors turned into commodified objects, exploited under capitalism. For example, according to Jaggar,

Just as the capacity to labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, so does sexuality, especially the sexuality of women. Thus prostitutes, like wage laborers, have an essential human capacity alienated. Like wage laborers, they become dehumanized and their value as persons is measured by their market price. And like wage laborers, they are compelled to work by economic pressure; prostitution, if not marriage, may well be the best option available to them.⁸⁰

Prostitution, then, for Marxist feminists serves as a metaphor for the oppression of the wage laborer in the capitalist system.⁸¹ While such an analysis accounts for the political and economic context in which prostitution occurs, it bypasses the effects of other critical forces, such as gender and the sociocultural and political conditions and inequalities underpinning prostitution, which greatly impact the experiences of women of color in the commercial sex industry. As noted by the Combahee River Collective in their 1977 statement: “Although we are in essential

agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women."⁸²

In summary, *Touching Paranoia* builds on Holland, Jackson, Lorde, and Miller-Young, among others, to explore the effects of slavery and America's shameful racial and sexual history on contemporary sexuality and race relations through the experiences of women of color in the commercial sex industry. Using the multiple lenses of race, gender, paranoia, touch, and the erotic, this project: (1) examines contemporary anxieties around race, desire, and transactional intimacy; (2) explores the effects of history, representation, fear, and the economy on the daily lives of erotic masseuses of color; (3) unsettles fixed notions of sexual and racial identity, truth, morality, and the image of the prostitute in the collective imagination; and (4) highlights the ways women of color in the commercial sex industry navigate, negotiate, and subvert centuries-old controlling images in popular media and imagination, the American value system, and respectability within an industry and larger society based on their devaluation.

II. BLACK FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS FIXING METHODOLOGY IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

In “Fixing Methodologies: Beloved,” pioneering Black feminist critic Barbara Christian identifies and analyzes the reparative properties of Toni Morrison’s use of West African cosmology and values in the novel *Beloved*. By reading *Beloved* as a “fixing ceremony,” or healing practice, Christian points toward the possibility of the critic functioning in a similar way.¹ She crafts her essay as a “fixing methodology” that can serve as a model for other critics who want to use knowledge that comes from “below” as part of their interpretive strategies. Christian also imparts through her writing and pedagogy the significance of naming one’s personal relationship to the literature about which one writes, even if one does not explicitly discuss that relationship in one’s scholarly essays. She herself did this consistently and courageously, while knowing and counting the cost of her “lifesaving” critical practice.²

Merging (auto)ethnography, Black feminist thought, Black performance studies, and creative writing, I advance Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as a fixing methodology—a theoretical and methodological means to both critically and creatively tell the stories of Black women’s lives within the field of communication. Distinct from ethnography, which is more often associated with and published by White scholars, Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) is an embodied methodological and theoretical praxis that converges Black feminist thought and autoethnography. Differing from other self-narrative writings such as memoir and traditional ethnography, BFA emphasizes the unique and valuable standpoint of Black women, who must deal simultaneously with issues of race, gender, and class, in addition to socio-historical influences. Patricia Hill Collins’ canonical *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* states that Black feminist thought demonstrates:

Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people.³

In *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*, Irma McClaurin defines auto/ethnography as a form that enables the writer "...to assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general description (ethnography)."⁴ However, not all researchers place an equal emphasis on autobiography (content) and ethnography (inquiry process). According to Ellis & Bochner, "[a]utoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" and that "[d]ifferent exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes."⁵ Conflating these definitions, BFA is an ethnographic inquiry that emphasizes the importance of Black women's distinctive standpoints in developing cultural understandings and confronting race, gender, and class oppression.

To achieve this ethnographic intent, Black feminist autoethnographers undergo the usual ethnographic research process of data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. Like traditional ethnographers, they are expected to treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what is recalled, observed, and told of them. However, Black feminist autobiographical narratives stray from traditional ethnographies and autoethnographies in that they enable Black women to both report and describe what they observe (more objective) while also interpreting their observations through an intersectional lens that can employ theory, personal recollections, and ideas for social change (less objective). Seeing that Black women have been historically silenced and repressed, BFA gives a voice to the voiceless, and reaffirms the notion of Black women as agents of knowledge. According to communications scholar Robin Boylorn:

I came to auto/ethnography because I needed a space to call out my name. In all of the scholarship that I read as a graduate student, I didn't see myself or representations of myself as a rural, country, southern, brown-skinned beautiful girl. ...So auto/ethnography was an entry place for me to call out my name and tell my truth and tell my stories, and to kind of realize the ways that I could own and celebrate where I came from and who I was when nobody else was doing it.⁶

I find this genre particularly useful as a Black feminist within the field of communication attempting to highlight voices often rendered speechless while simultaneously articulating my

own conditions and experiences. As communication scholar Ronald L. Jackson, II notes, “African-American intellectualism remains subordinated within the communication discipline, which institutionally refuses to acknowledge the importance of non-White ways of knowing. With that refusal comes a dismissal of African-American identities, which are enveloped in African-American communication research.”⁷ To render Black women—who exist at the intersections of multiple oppressions, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation—more visible within the field of communication, I advocate Black feminist autoethnography, which not only allows the “researcher to make visible the ways in which everyday talk reflects community and communicator identities,” but also **highlights “individuals as choice making agents and is concerned with how everyday talk and texts influence identity.”**⁸ Thus Black feminist autoethnography enables Black women to redefine agency, assert Black female self-determination, “talk back” to systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, ableism). As bell hooks states:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject— the liberated voice.⁹

According to McClaurin, BFA is a form that enables the writer “...to assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general description (ethnography).”¹⁰ BFA serves as a key tool in documenting and explicating my findings, experiences, and theoretical understandings. As a qualitative method that operates as a form of resistance and critique, it enables me to “interrupt/disrupt the elitist, sexist, and racist dynamics” of traditional academic research, Black respectability, and systemic oppression; give a personal and critical voice to my experiences for the purpose of extending understandings of the commercial sex industry; and further situate Black women as valuable producers of knowledge.¹¹

I combine traditional ethnographic methods for data gathering (participant observation, interviewing, document collection, archival research, and the writing of field notes), the awareness of the reflexive ethnographer (morally and politically self-aware and self-consciously

present in his or her writing),¹² and virtual ethnography methodological approaches to conduct textual analyses of virtual massage advertisements to explore the ways in which Black women use the Internet to both counter and employ dominant racialized, gendered, (hyper)sexualized, and classed scripts to create nuanced representations of Black womanhood. I draw heavily from communication scholars and ethnographers D. Soyini Madison, H.L. “Bud” Goodall, Norman Denzin, Dwight Conquergood, and Hannah Harvey Blevins, whose critical and creative approaches offer new and provocative ways for turning qualitative data and field notes into gripping representations of social life. In *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics and Performance*, Madison defines the method of critical ethnography as “always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world.”¹³ Similarly, in *Writing the New Ethnography*, Goodall describes an ethnography stating: “It’s ethnographic slant has been fashioned by a way of working, a way of entering the world every day, which privileges asking questions about others in cultural contexts constructed and understood by a self whose presence is very much in the text.”¹⁴ Like Madison and Goodall, I seek to negotiate and converge various texts—language, voices, dialects, personal accounts, histories—to construct my own approach to performance ethnography, while continually exploring the ethical “positionality” of a performance ethnographer committed to maintaining the “integrity” and “enacting the rights of citizenship” of each voice.¹⁵

In the essay “Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Performative Acts,” Manthia Diawara calls for theory of Black cultural studies that addresses the performative aspects of Black expressive cultures. Diawara writes: “Black performance studies would mean study of the ways in which Black people, through communicative action, created and continue to create themselves within the American experience.”¹⁶ I apply Diawara’s construction of Black performance studies to explore the ways in which erotic masseuses of color use language and performance to not only convey and communicate ideas, but as modes of resistance. Madison, in “Critical Ethnography as Street Performance: Reflections of Home, Race, Murder, and Justice,” notes the possibilities that accompany merging performance and ethnography. Following two years of fieldwork on poverty

and indigenous human rights activism in Ghana, Madison turns her data into a public performance “for the purpose of advocacy and change.”¹⁷ I have aimed to let my dissertation serve as its own performance. Through language and characterization and descriptions of interactions and behaviors, I seek to demonstrate Black women’s culture. I merge the stories of the masseuses and my story with African-American literature (slave narratives, fiction, and music lyrics) to construct a collaborative performance while offering a genealogy of Black women’s labor and resistance, and the interplay between Black women’s work decisions, communicative practices, and their social, economic, cultural, and historical constraints. As Norman Denzin argues in *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, the collaborative format occurs when “interviewer and respondent tell a story together.”¹⁸

Critical Race Feminism and Standpoint Theory as Renewed Methodology in Communication Studies

My “renewed methodology”¹⁹ also aims to combat the majority of feminist ethnographies that reduce sex work to either highly exploitative or empowering while ignoring the many nuances of the industry and the socio-cultural contexts that inform this illicit economy. Grounding my empirical findings in critical theory, as well as theoretical discourse of feminism(s), Marxism, cultural studies, and communication studies, I expand work in critical race theory and methodology to construct what I have coined a *critical race feminist socio-cultural methodology* within my BFE.²⁰

Critical race feminism (CRF),²¹ which is rooted in critical race theory, Black feminism, and feminist legal theory, emphasizes the legal status of women of color, who face multiple and simultaneous discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and class, as well as factors such as religion, sexual orientation, age, and dis/ability.²² CRF also emphasizes counter-storytelling as a methodology of resistance, challenges deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of women of color and offers a space to conduct and research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of these women. Thus, I employ CRF to deconstruct and challenge the oppressive social structures embedded in the sex industry and its laws, policies, and social

reform; give voice to Black women laborers in the commercial sex industry; and question the dominant ideologies in which commercial sex, women of color, and women of color in the commercial sex industry are constructed.

Together, a sex- radical Black feminist Marxist framework and Black feminist autoethnography enabled me to develop O'Neill's concept of ethno-mimeses—a form of participatory action research with marginalized populations that “illuminates the researcher's self-reflexive involvement in the research.”²³ As a Black feminist and ethnographer, I embody what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the “outsider within” status.²⁴ Collins argues that Black feminist intellectuals—particularly those “in touch with their marginality”—are able to tap into this standpoint to produce “distinctive analyses of race, class and gender.”²⁵ Black feminist critic bell hooks also communicates this standpoint in *From Margin to Center* when she describes her childhood: “living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside and in from the inside out...we understood both.”²⁶ Similarly, I find myself living on the margins, in this unique space of Black feminist liminality—a masseuse, graduate student, and ethnographer.

This liminal status has both its share of advantages and limitations. It allowed me to connect with my informants on a more personal and cultural level. In the article “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” Collins notes that there are three key themes in Black feminist thought: (1) it is produced by Black women; (2) it assumes that Black women will share certain commonalities of perception with one another as a group; and (3) Black female intellectuals must produce facts and theories about the Black female experience in order to clarify a Black woman's standpoint for all women since its contours may to be clear to all Black women.²⁷ Thus, I used both my commonalities and “outsider within” status with my informants to gain a certain level of trust. However, I realized that I also had to take into account my closeness to the subject, my position as a doctoral student, and the power dynamics that exist between researcher and informant (as well as other ethical obligations when entering sensitive fields of research, such as doing whatever is possible not to objectify and exploit my informants, while also keeping myself out of risk).

While there will be those who dismiss my work as not “proper” ethnography for its style and “going native”²⁸ methods, I am more committed to embracing communicative strategies that “probe other possibilities that will challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning, and denigrate identities and communities”²⁹ than conceding to traditional colonizing methods that continue to “Other” Black women, sex workers, and other marginalized bodies.³⁰ I consider my research a part of my everyday, or what Dan Rose refers to as “living the ethnographic life.”³¹ In this way, this dissertation operates as a resistant performance against structure, form, and the deeply racialized, gendered, and classed assumptions and values that undergird notions of “normalcy” within academic discourse, and works to produce knowledge that is both universal/theoretical and local/practical, Black popular culture.³² As cultural critic Stuart Hall notes, Black popular culture

in its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, Black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different—other forms of life, other traditions of representations.³³

I am reminded of the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, in which Toni Morrison explains the stylistic choices employed throughout her first novel: “My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in Black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are an attempt to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture.”³⁴ My choices of style and language, and my reliance on affective prose, narrative, and thin description serve similar purposes. I have sought to make tangible and break the silence surrounding the experiences, bodies, and sexualities of Black women, while transfiguring ideologies that continue to disrupt the possibilities of our existence

I build on the work of Christian, Angelou, Morrison, as well as other Black feminist and womanist writers and scholars such as Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, among others, who each use the written word as a tool of resistance, articulating and thereby validating

the experiences of Black women. I specifically seek to further discussions around Black female resistance and sexuality and offer alternative conceptualizations through which to imagine Black female sexualities and modes of resistance in academia, particularly communication studies.

Touching Paranoia is about more than sex or sexuality as work. It is about the commercial sex industry's ability to shed light on common contradictions and paradoxes, to blatantly expose not only systems of oppression, inequality, and hierarchies of power, but also the complexities of desire, human nature, race, blackness, and the imagination. It is about the ways in which inequalities and injustices—whether they occur in a massage parlor, courtroom, or the streets of New York City—reiterate and reinforce difference and determine the value, or amount of citizenship, afforded to certain human beings. It is about the sex industry's ability to illustrate racism and sexism as systemic and institutional unable to be reduced to a set of beliefs or attitudes. It is about the effects of stereotypes, stigma, and surveillance on the everyday experiences of women of color: our construction of identity and consciousness, behaviors, encounters, understandings of the world, how we negotiate and perform race, gender, class, and sexuality. It is about the connections between race, intimacy, and citizenship. It is about Black women's humanity. It is about the fact that we purportedly live in a democracy, yet Black women are perpetually forced to sacrifice their already-limited autonomy and freedom in hopes of coming closer to the cruelly optimistic "American Dream." It is about the blurring of socially constructed boundaries and binaries: sex/work, fantasy/reality, private/public, legal/illegal, visibility/invisibility, black/white, virgin/whore, subject/object, slavery/freedom. As Julia O'Connell Davidson contests in *Children in the Global Sex Trade*:

The idea that human beings can be neatly divided into fixed, impermeable groupings defined by their difference from one another—Adult and Child, free worker and slave, voluntary migrant and trafficked person, agent and victim, subject and object—is just that, an idea. In reality, the lines between tyranny and consent, domination and freedom, objectification and moral agency, childhood and adulthood, are not and never have been clear-cut, nor do they map neatly onto one another.³⁵

In short, *Touching Paranoia* uses the commercial sex industry—an underground racialized and gendered sexual marketplace in which conscious and unconscious racial bias is

expressed as “personal preference” and discrimination is unrestrained by laws and political correctness—as a lens to further examine contemporary race relations; the relationship between race, racism, desire, and paranoia; and the particular ways the legacy of slavery affects the daily realities of women of color in the industry. By positioning the lived realities of erotic masseuses of color as its focus, this dissertation joins a growing body of scholarship bringing the voices of erotic laborers of color from margin to center in order to more fully understand the complexities and contradictions of Black female sexuality and womanhood in late-capitalist America.

I have divided the ten essays into four sections, each of which offer small windows into the expansive world of commercial sex, particularly erotic massage, and the complex terrain of race, racism, and desire in our contemporary post-race, no touch society. Taken together, these sections, which situate erotic massage within a discussion of race, desire, history, and the economy, aim to galvanize discussions of the modern-day commercial sex industry as a critical site for rethinking conceptions of race, power, intimacy, desire, and pleasure in our era of political correctness. As you will see, the adult massage studio offers an opportunity to assess contemporary gender, race, sexual and class politics, the enduring legacy of slavery and respectability on Black women’s conceptions and performances of Black sexuality and womanhood, and the erotic potential that lies at the intersection of race, racism, desire, and touch.

ESSAYS

I. POLITRICKING: PERFORMING RACE, SEXUALITY, & RESPECTABILITY THROUGH LATE CAPITALISM

In a discussion of the significance of the cultural context of the commercial sex industry, researchers Teela Sanders, Maggie O'Neil, and Jane Pitcher write, "The social context must be defined in its broadest sense as it is this context that determines how the sex markets operate, are organized and the experiences of the people who work in them." Fittingly, **Section One,**

Politricking: Performing Race, Sexuality, and Respectability Through Late

Capitalism, offers an overview of the erotic massage industry, exploring the social context within which this contemporary sex industry exists, and its influence on workers and clients.

Interrogating the micro-interactional relationships between workers and workers and clients, it centers on the interconnectedness between everyday racism and the erotic and the ways interlocking systems of oppression affect the daily realities of masseuses.

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, Mireille Miller-Young argues that Black women porn actress symbolically and strategically find ways to make use of their presumed hypersexuality and self-commodification within "a racialized and gendered sexual commerce where stereotypes, structural inequalities, and social biases are the norm"¹ for their own interests in survival, success, and sexual agency within advanced capitalism. One strategy, she writes, "is to work extremely hard to carve out space and fabricate themselves as marketable and desirable actors ... they invest a great deal of time and money on self-fashioning and taking care of their bodies in order to achieve competitiveness.

Attending to the ways masseuses rhetorically construct and perform their identities, I develop the concept of "politricking"—the ways women of color in the commercial sex industry reimagine respectability politics and morality in their performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality in order to attain upward mobility and financial security while maintaining a level of personal agency and dignity within an always-exploitative capitalist society. The term combines

the “politics of respectability”² and “trick,” which means: (1) to deceive or outwit (someone) by being cunning or skillful; (2) the art or knack of doing something skillfully; (3) a prostitute’s customer; or (4) a sexual act between a prostitute and customer.

Politricking encompasses the variety of ways we reimagined respectability politics and morality in our performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality in order to attain upward mobility and financial security while maintaining a level of personal agency and dignity within an always-exploitative capitalist society. Despite working in a underground economy, we still abided by our own versions of respectability politics. Cynthia M. Blair, in *I've Got to Make My Living*, makes similar observations about the role of respectability on the experiences of Black women prostitutes in turn-of-the-century Chicago. While they operated outside of respectability, Blair observes, Black prostitutes still negotiated the same working class notions of respectability, individual self-respect, and economic self-reliance as Black women in more respectable professions, “Black women's sex work was a constant negotiation of working-class notions of respectability, individual self-respect, and economic self-reliance,” according to Blair. “This negotiation was inseparable from the ongoing struggles over the meaning of prostitution taking place in American cities and within urbanizing black communities. Furthermore, Black women's efforts to claim self-reliance through sexual labor were inseparable from other urbanites' struggles over the meaning and, indeed, the valuation of black women's bodies in the modern city.”

By examining emotion work from a sex-radical Black feminist Marxist lens, I add to scholarship on emotional labor in the commercial sex industry, which typically focuses on the experiences of middle-class white women and workers outside of the United States, exploring the ways women of color—who exist at the intersection of race, gender, class, and the economy—uniquely experience race and racism in intimate encounters, and how they navigate and negotiate prejudice in an industry and larger society built on their devaluation.³

POLITRICKIN': AN ESSAY

I believe most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of opportunity to be otherwise.⁴

—MAYA ANGELOU

'But for God's sake, learn to look beneath the surface,' he said. 'Come out of the fog, young man ... Play the game, but don't believe in it -- that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way -- part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate ...'⁵

—RALPH ELLISON

There is nothing in back of this cafe. Since the place sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility, the back door opens out to a void. It takes courage to turn the knob and heart to leave the steps.⁶

—GLORIA NAYLOR

The man at the register looked like a typical client: white, middle-aged, middle-class, mediocre suit. He was leaning slightly forward, smiling at the pretty Mexican-looking cashier as he paid for his meal, put his loose change in the small metal container with TIPS APPRECIATED handwritten across the front.

Yup, I said, definitely him.

I was sitting in the corner booth by the window of the third-floor building cafeteria with the new girl Sade. She wasn't paying me any attention.

Still not ringing, she finally said, looking up and waving her pre-paid phone in the air between us.

Mine either, I said. It was the end of January 2011, Sade's third day working at the Office—what we all called the adult massage studio on the eighth floor—going on my third week. The end of the month was usually slow, according to Alice, the unofficial house mom of the Office. Like holidays when clients were on family vacations, tax season before refund checks

came in, basketball finals, and Lakers game, people were low on discretionary funds, waiting on their next check. Alice said we'd make up for it at the beginning of next month.

Sade said she didn't have time to wait. She had bills to pay now. I didn't say anything, stared at my cup—nothing but a little melting ice and teaspoon of water left—debating if I wanted to get up and ask for another free refill.

We'd responded to the same Craigslist ad. The headline read FAST CASH. NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED. It was a help wanted ad for body rubs girls, all ethnicities, make \$300-\$500 a day. We'd been told the same set of lies by the owner Rhonda, that we could expect to make a thousand dollars a week. Do everything right, she'd said, and you'll have men buying all types of things, nice things, designer bags, jewelry, shit, maybe even a car. Rhonda drove a Mercedes SUV. I'd just turned 22, barely had a dollar to my name. I would've settled for one of the above.

Rhonda opened her first studio in 2009, a two-room office space next to the cafeteria that she shared with Alice. In less than two years, she'd expanded to a four-room studio with five to ten girls working for her at a time. Not bad for a Black woman born and raised in Inglewood with a high school degree. It didn't take long to realize that Rhonda told us whatever she wanted because she knew she could. She knew paying her \$30 room rental fees for hour massages beat waiting tables, joining the hordes of Ivy League graduates answering phones and sorting mail at talent agencies in the hopes of becoming the next big Hollywood agent. She knew that we had nowhere else to go, that she was the only person hiring handfuls of Black girls outside of the seedier strip clubs in the all-Black neighborhoods.

I'd applied for cocktail waitress positions in West LA, went to open calls for hostesses at downtown hostess bars. Each time I was given what I've come to consider the "we don't hire Black women, at least not Black women as dark as you" run around. They'd either tell me to come back, that they'd call me (they never did, sometimes didn't even take my number), or that they were no longer hiring (the "hiring" sign would still be hanging in the window). Other people were more explicit, wrote disclaimers in their online ads like NO BLACK WOMEN NEEDED or WHITE, LIGHT SKIN LATINAS AND RUSSIANS ONLY or ONLY AMERICAN GIRLS (American

meaning white). Rhonda, though, she understood the complicated relationship between race and desire, that the two were like a psychic knot of history and guilt, pleasure and disgust tightly bound over centuries. She knew that we had to do whatever we could to loosen it, or at least find a way to make a profit.

You didn't put the address, right? I said to Sade. She hadn't. Rhonda said it was for safety purposes, that we couldn't just have a bunch of men banging down the door, lining up in the hallways. Two things you learned quickly working at the Office: there's always another side to the truth and place is as much a state of mind as a physical location.

The Office was in old brick-faced commercial high-rise in a shabby part of town, between LAX—the largest and busiest airport in California (seventh busiest in the world)—and the Bottoms, once considered the deadliest neighborhood in the South Bay, a claustrophobic six-block string of decaying motel-style public housing complexes linked by alleyways, fast-food chains, bus stops tagged in Crenshaw Mafia Gang graffiti. The Office was discreet, on the same hallway as a telemarketing company and dentist office with a MEDICAID ACCEPTED sign on the door. There was no storefront. No open till late neon sign you could spot a mile away. No line of trafficked Asian girls and women to pick from like clothes off a rack.

Once you walked inside the nondescript building, past the security guard who was usually out back or walking one of the girls to their cars, took the elevator to the ninth floor, made a left, stopped at the door with INNOVATIVE CONSULTING written across the front, entered the code (the owner Rhonda only gave it to you once she thought she could trust you), you were inside the Office lobby. It did what it could, cost-efficiently as possible, to make itself seem as far removed as possible from its surroundings. In the lobby an old black futon with colorful throw pillows sat next to a mini-refrigerator with a towel warmer on top, across from a glass table holding an old desktop computer with no Internet, a small television with no cable, a stack of magazines months, years old, and a plastic tub of licorice even more outdated. The carpet was faded, thinning in the areas that got the most foot traffic—the path from the front door to the massage rooms—most of it hidden beneath a large geometric pattern rug. The air smelled of

vanilla incense, sweat, and effort.

There were four massage rooms. Room 1 belonged to Alice. She was a short, squat Filipina woman around fifty with bouncy jet black hair and an accent that took getting used to. She did all the laundry, made sure the Office stayed cleaned, fed me. She always carried the bag of an over-prepared bodega mom: bags of potato chips and Doritos, tissues, generic mini water bottles and cans of artificially-flavored drank, plastic baggies and storage containers of sliced fruit. She decorated her massage room with dollar-store TLC: faux miniature bamboo trees and candles aligning the shelves, her massage table always draped with two matching sheets and a pillow, always smelled of incense. Reminded me of the urban nail salons back home in New York.

Rooms 2 and 3 were the smallest, just fitting a massage table and a stand big enough to hold a clock and stereo. Those massage tables got the older sheets, the ones with visible stains too thick to get out in the wash, and the rooms were darker, the batteries usually dead in half the candles. I shared these rooms mostly with Eva and Veronica, who were usually in the Office with me and Alice. Veronica was the oldest and most experienced masseuse. She was a computer programmer, BDSM mistress, and escort. I felt closest to Eva, a combination of her friendly personality and being closest in age—she was 25—and how nice she always was. She was an aspiring actress from Chicago's Southside, moved to LA after high school to attend an acting conservatory. She'd started working at the Office a week or two before me, was looking for something with flexible hours that paid well and would leave enough time for auditions and casting calls. There were a few other girls who came in but they didn't stay. One was a white girl whose Black boyfriend would wait outside for her during appointments and the other was a married Latina who had to be home before her husband since he didn't know what she did, though none of our families knew what we did. Eva and I told people we were assistants or receptionists. Alice's family knew she was a masseuse, same for Veronica, they just left out the sensual part.

The door to Room 4, Rhonda's room, stayed closed. Double the size of the others, she adorned it with long mirrors, a chase lounge, candles, cheap paintings. If you stared closely at the glass shelves, you could see pieces of melted jolly ranchers. She had a thing for chewing on

them and taking them out of her mouth half eaten when a client arrived.

We spent most of our time in Room 5, the storage room turned our private lounging area. The room was small, the whole thing no more than six by eight feet. Love seat, mirror, small table cluttered with makeup, snacks, hairbrushes. Two floor-length sagging filing cabinets crowding the wall to the right. Four of the eight doors either open or missing, exposing Alice's neatly-folded piles of towels and wash clothes, dull twin-sized flat and fitted sheets, plastic bottles of unscented lotion with a scent and generic baby oil from the dollar store, half-empty cans of air freshener, dead candles, the top right drawer with a pile of mini envelopes with the words name, DATE, TIME, LENGTH OF SESSION, AMOUNT written in dried-out magic marker beside Rhonda's fire-proof steel cash box with a slit at the top just wide enough to slip in our cash-filled envelopes. Taped to the wall beside the door above the light switch you had to flip down to turn the lights on was a copy of the contract we signed when we first started listing the Office rules.

Keep Office tidy

No fighting in Office

No eating and drinking in Office

No sex with clients in massage rooms

Be respectful of other workers

You are an independent contractor

Is it safe over there? a potential client might ask once you told him the address. Yes, it is completely safe over here, you learned to say. We never have any problems. It is quiet and discreet. We also have security downstairs, though it's not even necessary.

It only took a few seconds on the phone to figure out most of what you needed to know. How most of us screened—a combination of intuition, caller ID, generalizations, and Google. You learned to listen for cues, tone of voice, attitude, questions asked, requests. We got a lot of requests: men wanting to kiss, cuddle, cross dress, lick the bottoms of our shoes, mutual touch, blow jobs, fingers and other objects stuck in their anuses, whatever else they were scared to ask

their wives and girlfriends. An experience with a Black woman.

The phone worked both ways. Some girls didn't take men who sounded Black or Latino on the phone, said they didn't tip, wanted too much for too little, not like those white men who were just glad to be in our presence. There was never a mention of most serial killers and rapists being white men. Perception versus reality. Occasionally I'd lose a client as soon as I picked up the phone, the ones who were looking for a certain type of Black, were convinced I was a white girl. But the phone worked both ways, usually in my favor. Clients on the fence—paranoid about coming to the area, meeting a woman they'd found on an adult website—often told me my voice won them over. I sounded sweet, they said, nice, articulate. What I heard: *You's sure ain't like your kind*. I guess those four years of Ivy League education were paying off.

I studied Sade's face. Even with the sun splashing on her skin, she was still dark as nightshade. Her face was long and narrow with exaggerated features—large eyes, wide mouth, big forehead—like one of those ivory Benin masks said to chase away evil spirits. Beneath was a body still imprinted with whatever sports she'd played in high school. Lean, slightly muscular, tight butt. She was what kids back in the day would've called a buttaface. Everything look good but ta face. Looking at her made me feel good about myself, like I finally had one up.

I tried to hide my shock when Sade told me about her Hollywood plans. She said she'd moved to LA a couple years earlier from Texas to pursue her acting career, maybe modeling. She sounded so genuine, assured when she said it, as though she actually believed all it took was belief and hard work to make it happen like putting together furniture from IKEA. I wondered if she knew she wasn't getting calls for body rubs for the same reason she wasn't getting called back after auditions. Didn't matter if you were working above or underground, everyone played by the same rules, same hierarchies. The darker you were, the less value you were believed to have. Sex might sell, but beauty pays.

I'd get mad about it when I first started, roll my eyes in secret every time Eva's phone rang. There was nothing really different about our ads other than the color of her skin. A lot of men went for the lighter women. Black but not too Black. I'd learned this a long time ago, that light

skin was its own kind of capital—from the boys in middle school through college preferring girls with light skin and long hair, rap lyrics idolizing long-haired, thick red bones, dark-skinned girls trying to conceal their blackness in the form of blue and hazel contact lenses, blond weaves, skin lightening creams. I had to remind myself that it wasn't Eva's fault, that it wasn't what she did, but how we'd be socialized. Still, it was a lot easier to get mad at an actual person than the faceless system that had taught us to put whiteness on a pedestal. Instead of saying any of this, I said, Let me see your ad. I wanted to make sure Sade had put the keywords—clean, discreet, private, independent contractors—phrases that helped to ease client paranoia—that she catered her ad to the right audience.

Keep it classy, not assy. Rhonda's words of advice to me when I made my first ad. We were sitting on the futon in the Office lobby, Rhonda looking over my shoulder, so close I could smell the watermelon jolly rancher melting on her tongue. She said a lot of girls were doing too much in their ads, had on too little, made the look cheap. We were trying to attract a more upscale clientele, white businessmen from out of town, places like Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, Calabasas.

I looked down at the floor, my Target flip-flops and chipped black toenail polish. Rhonda's five-inch stripper heels with the plastic strap across the front rested on the carpet beside her French pedicured feet and Gucci bag. Men like to look at your feet during their massage, she'd said before suggesting that I get a pedicure. She had a thing for offering suggestions that weren't really suggestions: You should think about wearing a dress instead of those leggings, maybe put on some heels. You're gonna comb your hair, right? Anyone can give a good hand job, she'd add later. You have to offer good conversation and a good massage if you want regulars.

Her words reminded me of the rules I'd been expected to follow since childhood: speak properly, be twice as good and half as Black, don't act a fool, dress appropriately, sit up straight, fix your face. The technical term is politics of respectability. The unwritten rules and codes of behavior Black people have been subscribing to for over a century in an attempt to make white people see us as human. It appeared that even underground, the white gaze was still following

us, still determining how we dressed, how we talked, how we experienced the world. I dubbed Rhonda's version the politricks of respectability.

I scanned Sade's ad. She had her real age listed and three photos from her acting slash modeling portfolio—one close up, two full body shots in jeans and a tank top. They all included her face. I showed her my ad. I advertised as a 21-year-old student—not that clients actually believed what we said. Still, I saw it as a good marketing strategy, a way to lure in the men looking for the full package, plus it was how I was able to justify the work to myself, even if it was a lie.

I told her to scan other ads for examples. What I did a lot while I waited for calls. Checked to see who posted, what services were being offered. Seemed like each day new massage techniques were popping up along with new girls. They'd all discovered that it was a good sector of the industry to get into, more respectable than stripping and escorting and still had a little mystery to it, plus it was relatively safe and didn't require a lot of capital. With all the new specialty websites and apps, the never-ending stream of immigrants, and the financial crisis that came and never left, it was getting easier and easier to get in the industry and we were competing with more and more girls: locals and foreigners, young and old, poor and middle-class, single and married, educated and uneducated, heterosexual and gender-bending. Prices and services varied from masseuse to masseuse, day to day, but one thing remained the same: white women would always be charging the most.¹ Like Veronica said one day, a white girl can charge \$250 and do nothing and we have to do backflips and offer everything on the menu for \$100.

I told Sade about my photo trick. I was afraid someone I knew might find out about my temporary employment so I used photos of women with similar skin tones I found on the Internet, cropped out most of the face, usually just leaving the painted lips and chin visible. I only had a problem with that once. Veronica called my phone one morning—she'd never done that—told me I needed to take down my pictures immediately. Apparently the woman I used was a famous porn actress and Veronica was a porn connoisseur. I hadn't picked up that hobby yet.

We each had our own tricks, ways of making it our own. Eva marketed her beauty, youth,

and personality as bargaining chips. Highlighted her personality and good conversation, skin tone. Headlines like HONEY BROWN BEAUTY. When my phone wasn't ringing, I'd switch up my ad, change my photos, ethnicity, advertise as half Black and anything that wasn't Black. Sometimes new people would call, other times men I'd already seen. Veronica would come in early, usually on hump day, which was usually the slowest, and advertise an early bird special. The key though, she told me and Eva, was to have a price you weren't willing to lower, to remember your worth. Easier when you had a full-time job and reliable income.

Alice paid for sponsored ads so they would appear on the side of the website, always on the first page no matter how many people posted. She needed to more than the rest of us. If we were doing backflips for \$100, Alice was doing a whole Olympic qualifying routine for \$80. She had three things working against her: location, age, ethnicity. There were so many Asian girls and women masseuses—from underage to their 70s—offering massages for as low as \$20, that she had to lower her prices to compete. When business was really slow, she went as low as \$60. She advertised as grown and sexy to stand out and appeal to more older middle-class men. Sometimes used her circumstance as part of her hustle. She told regulars about her situation, that her mother was dying or that her rent was past due, used their sympathy and traditional notions of manhood for a bigger tip or a loan they both knew she had no intention of repaying. She got me once.

You have a work name? I said to Sade, taking my arm out of my sleeve. I was wearing a hoodie, the navy blue one with the University of Pennsylvania logo sewn across the chest that I kept in my car. I had on a low cut burgundy spandex dress underneath, put the sweater over it to look more inconspicuous, keep from bringing alarm to the other businesses in the building or the landlord. As far as they were concerned, we worked at Innovative Consulting, a run-of-mill telemarketing company.

I'd picked my name the day of my interview, which was more of a looking over. Alice said it made things easier, more convenient when each girl had one name they used with clients and the other girls in the Office, plus they already had a Jasmine. I didn't know at the time that your

name was part of the performance, the top layer of the mask. How we separated our personal and professional lives—or at least that was what you learned to tell yourself. I don't know why, but I chose the name Crystal.

Sade paused, then decided that she didn't need a work name since the job was just temporary, something to pay the bills until her career took off.

Temporary. What we all said, what Alice had been saying since 2009. But there we all were, like a bunch of Pretty Woman extras on the wrong side of the track.

It's just fast cash, Sade added. We all said that too, about the fast cash, not realizing that fast didn't necessarily mean easy. All the touching, talking, sweet-talking, flirting, smiling, makeup applying, turning down of advances without offending, pretending, performing.

I gave Sade her phone back, returned to sizing up the people coming in and out of the cafeteria, like a sociology experiment. Men and women in suits and ties, jeans and tee shirts, polos with company logos over the heart. I stared at the man walking over to the refrigerator, wondered if he was one of those men who liked Black women in private but wouldn't acknowledge us in public. Like my clients with white wives who came in during their lunch breaks, went on about how sexy they thought Black women were, yet had never dated one of us.

My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts. A client wanting to come in for an hour session. He said his name was John. They always seemed to have some name out of the Bible—John, James, Mark, Paul. Sometimes I'd missed their calls and when I'd call back, I'd get their voicemails. I never left a message, just waited to hear the name. It was never John, James, Mark, or Paul. The man on the phone asked if we had a shower. I told him we didn't but I always used unscented lotion and would wipe him down afterwards with hot towels. He still declined.

At least your phone's ringing, Sade said after I hung up. I didn't say anything. We both looked back down at our phones as if one cue, settled in our silence, let it hover for a while. I slumped back in the bench, ate the last of the chocolate chip cookies we were sharing. There was a long silence until Sade looked up from her phone and said, FBSM? Her head was tilted slightly to the right as though what she'd just seen had thrown her off balance. Full body sensual

massage, I said. She wanted to know what that implied. I paused for a while, then told her that it meant something different for every person but usually a massage with a hand release. Some girls offered topless massages, lingerie, nude, oral release or BJs (blow jobs). I explained other acronyms and industry terms. B2B: body to body massage. In-call: client comes to you. Outcall: you go to client—his home, hotel, et cetera. Release: also known as happy ending, hand job, self-service if you don't want to touch. Full service: sex, vaginal intercourse.

What services do you offer? Sade asked. I let her words hang in the air between us for a moment.

I just do the basics, I said, offering no additional details. Sade didn't seem to buy it but she didn't say anything else, just nodded. Eventually she broke the silence, asked me what time it was. I ignored her phone sitting right in front of her and said, Almost 3:30. She wanted to make sure she'd get an appointment and not waste another \$10.

No guarantees, I said. We both rolled our eyes. Sade said fuck it and posted. She asked if it was safe to stay alone at night. The phrase more or less came to mind. It wasn't that the job was inherently dangerous. The danger came from the beliefs and stigma around our work, society's sexual repression and Christian guilt, its hatred of Black women. Years later I'd learn that we were the most likely to get arrested and killed, the most common victims of the South Central serial killer—killers?—still on the loose.

There were two cameras in the Office: one facing the front door and one in the corner looking over the lobby. Rhonda said they were for our own protection, that clients would think twice before trying anything once they saw the camera, and if necessary, she could print out photographs of people's faces. Perception versus reality. The cameras were partly for safety but mostly for the illusion of safety and Rhonda's panopticon tendencies. Whenever she thought someone was stealing from her or going over their time in one of the rooms, she'd remind us that the cameras were always recording and she could look back at old footage at any time.

I warned Sade that some clients would try to have sex with her. It was a paradox. Men said they came to see us because we weren't escorts. They said massage seemed safer, cleaner, and left them with less guilt to take home to their girlfriends and wives. It might

technically be considered cheating, but paying an escort was much worse as far as they were concerned. Moral gymnastics. After a session or two, their tunes often changed. They'd offer me extra money while swearing that they didn't usually do this. There was just something about me. I was different from those other whores.

Sade didn't seem too concerned, said she was actually thinking about taking a friend up on an offer. One of her friends was an escort, told her she could make a thousand dollars in a day. Sade said she'd give the Office a week before she made up her mind, and made no apologies for her potential decision.

They say sensual massage is like the marijuana of the commercial sex industry, a gateway to the harder stuff. Eva said that's why you had to have boundaries, remind yourself what you were and weren't willing to do, remember who you were, what was important to you. I always keep in the back of my mind that there's more out there for me, Eva said. Boundaries grew slippery, permeable over time. It got easier by the day to rationalize things, over-rationalize things, harder to know the difference. Denial and rationalization our most effective tools in working through obligations. *We're not selling sex, just the idea of it. A sexual fantasy without actually going all the way. A hand job isn't sex. There's no penetration.* Took about three weeks to get over the shirt and bra. My body would always be my body as far as I was concerned. So what if subtle boundaries of intimacy and transaction had been given up on, that morals and the market were blurred. The hustle for money tends to outweigh the hustle for virtue. It is the American way.

About twenty minutes later, Sade's phone rang, a man requesting a 15-minute appointment, said he was in a rush, had a dinner to get to. They always had a dinner. I told Sade we weren't supposed to do anything under thirty minutes, meant they were just looking for a quickie. She didn't seem to care. Less work for me, she said. How much should I tell him? I said I didn't know since she'd still have to give Rhonda \$30 for a half hour room fee. She ended up charging him \$60, not marking the appointment since it was only 5 minutes. I pretended like I didn't see him walk in and out, told her she better hope Rhonda didn't check the cameras.

She smirked as she closed the door. That was easy, she said. I just sat there looking at her with equal doses of pity and envy.

II. TOUCH, DESIRE, AND RACIAL PARANOIA

Touch, Desire, and Racial Paranoia offers a greater exploration of the relationship between race, racism, desire, and paranoia, looking at the role that race plays in our individual and collective minds, and how the stories we tell and fictions we create about people, groups, and places have material effects at the individual, collective, and institutional levels. In the essay “Sorry, No Black Guys,” for example, I use the discriminatory practices in the commercial sex industry to explore the consequences of “master narratives”—particularly the ways racism creates, maintains, and justifies the use of “monovocal” stories that essentialize and erase the complexities of Black personhood.¹ As Frantz Fanon conjectures, the “European has a fixed concept of the Negro.” The “black body” and its “Manichean darkness” is an “artifact” of the “white man’s imagination.”² The essay “Touching Paranoia” uses personal experiences with a client as a stage for analyzing the fraught and messy terrain of racialized sexuality, specially the relationship between danger and pleasure, public and private, black and white; the eroticization of gendered and racialized inequalities; and the emancipatory possibilities of touch and the erotic.

TOUCHING PARANOIA: AN ESSAY

*The Jews and Hitler come to mind
The thought of slavery far behind
But white paranoia is here to stay
The white boy's scheming night and day, night and day.*³

—GIL SCOTT-HERON

*It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life.*⁴

—GAYLE RUBIN

*Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes
erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of
difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts,
and makes resistance possible. We cannot, however, accept
these new images uncritically.*⁵

—BELL HOOKS

He said his name was Ray, but I called him the German. Was easier that way, nicknames, made for quick identifiers in conversation with the other girls. Like most clients, he was over-worked and under-touched, an almost-attractive engineer in his 30s.

Second session in three days. Again the smell of cigarette smoke and men's body spray. He was more relaxed on the massage table, even initiated conversation, asked where I went to school, what I was studying, how much time I had left. I told him I went to USC, that I was an English major with one more year if everything went as planned. Close enough to the truth.

You already speak pretty good English to me, he said laughing.

I stared at the tattoos covering his pale back while I massaged his shoulders. He was covered from the nape of his neck to the elastic of his boxers. A sea of red and blue and green and black ink. We talked about everything and nothing. ‘

I started feeling guilty after a while, thinking about how I'd acted the first session. It had been fine in the beginning. He'd been the kind of nervous I liked, more anticipation than fear. Had one of those shy smiles that unfolded slowly across his lips like an origami trick. I eased his

nervousness with small talk, the typical what do you do, where are you from kind of questions. He said he was an engineer for some big company about an hour away depending on traffic, had moved from Germany almost ten years ago, was in the army before that.

I didn't hear anything after army. It was like a levee had broken, my mind flooding with disturbing thoughts and possibilities, things I'd seen on TV. *Is he one of those men who hates Black women? Prostitutes? Black women and prostitutes? Is he here to rape and kill me?* I thought about an old *Grey's Anatomy* episode. I was always thinking about an old *Grey's Anatomy* episode. The one from season four when Dr. Bailey has a patient who refuses to let her operate. At first she thinks it's because she's a woman but it turns out it's also because she's Black. The patient is a neo-Nazi, has a huge swastika tattooed across his stomach. She operates anyway.⁶

I spent the next ten minutes with my face close to his skin. I used my iPhone like a pair of precision binoculars, scanning his body with the light, trying to read between the ink for a swastika or maybe one of those SS lightning bolt tattoos. Something, anything to appease my panic. Nothing.

Paranoia came with the job...and my blackness. If I knew anything from a lifetime of being both Black and female, it was that I was to always be on high alert. To be black and female was to know that my skin was not simply an organ to protect me from microbes and allow the sensations of touch and heat and color. My skin was a marker of difference, a surface of racist inscription. It was to know that at any moment a police officer or civilian could literally take my life into their hands and that my death would be considered another case of NHI. No Human Involved. Paranoia or reasonable doubt?⁷

There was also the white client who'd told me in the middle of his massage that he'd come to me because I was Black and that he wanted to make his girlfriend mad. He said she hated Black people, was always using the n-word, and he didn't think it cool. Would you consider a 3-some or group massage? he asked me. When I didn't say anything, he told me I could even spit in her face, as if that proposition might make me reconsider. I told him he was making me

uncomfortable, though, I must admit, a part of me wanted to know more. I said I didn't offer sex or group massages and that I had no desire to spit in his girlfriend's face. Then I asked him why he thought she'd ever consider letting me touch her, let alone do anything sexual, if she hated Black people. He looked at me and said, I'd make her.

That phrase has stayed with me for years. I'd make her. I've found myself wondering if something like that could ever work. If he could actually make her come in and if she did, would it accomplish anything? I wondered if she might leave a different person, with a new view of Black people, or if I'd simply confirm all that she'd already believed. I read that in order to see with new eyes you have to get rid of old ways, that it's possible to relearn how to look and experience the world anew. What might happen if we engaged our other senses more as a form of knowledge? Might touch help us to see the unseeable?

In *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland writes that everyday meetings between black and white in the U.S. are always already burdened with age-old expectations, hidden scripts, and implicitly racist misreading. Despite it all, Holland offers touch as a potential space to help ease the burden. *Both physical and psychic*, she writes, *touch is an act that can embody multiple, conflicting agendas. It can be both a troubled and troublesome component in the relationship between intimates... or, alternatively, the touch can alter the very idea as well as the actuality of relationships, morphing friends into enemies and strangers into intimates. For touch can encompass empathy as well as violation, passivity as well as active aggression. It can be safely dangerous, or dangerously safe. It also carries a message about the immediate present, the possible future, and the problematic past. Finally, touch crosses boundaries, in fact and imagination.*⁸

Should I have said yes?

I spread oil across the German's back, glided by hands from the bottom of his back to his shoulders in long, even strokes. As I made my way up the second time, he moaned, said I had great hands.

He admitted that he'd been nervous at first, wasn't sure what to expect. Said he'd never gotten a massage off the Internet and didn't really come to the area unless he was going to the airport. Wasn't the first time I'd heard that.

For a lot of clients—and people in general—Inglewood existed as a figment in the Hollywood-induced imagination, a series of blurred snapshots and statistics, movie scenes from *Pulp Fiction* and *Grand Canyon* (Kevin Kline gets a flat tire on the way home from the Forum and almost pays for it with his life⁹), news clips of gang violence, black-on-black crime. Why, I'd come to realize, some clients came to the Office. It was more than a massage parlor or private studio. It was a place of ecstasy—the blurring of pleasure and danger, desire and disgust, attraction and revulsion, anticipation and anxiety, black and white. Like the brothels and cabarets in 1920s Harlem where white men and women slummed amongst the smiling, dancing animalistic Blacks, freely exploring their sexualities in Manhattan's African jungle before returning to the other side of the color line.¹⁰

The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger, writes bell hooks of the appeal of the Other. *In the cultural marketplace the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive, as holding the secret that will allow those who venture and dare to break with the cultural anhedonia ... and experience sensual and spiritual renewal*. In her essay *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, hooks speaks of the white consumption of Blackness, which she refers to as *eating the Other*. *Within commodity culture*, she states, *ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture*.¹¹ She compares white people having sex with people of color to an exciting adventure, like a trip to an exotic location where they are able to engage in *a ritual of transcendence, a movement into the world of difference*.¹²

Her words made me wonder if I was just adding a little temporary seasoning to clients' vanilla lives. Was I another new dish, to borrow from hooks, to be eaten, consumer, and forgotten? Was coming to the Office their version of a sexual safari? Domestic sex tourism?¹³ A way for to further experience their privilege?

White boys and men, according to hooks, who openly desire Black women and are willing to transgress racial boundaries within the realm of the sexual do not see themselves as racist.

Separating themselves from the racist white men who violated the bodies of women of color, they are not aware of the aspects of their sexual fantasies that stem from the European colonialist tradition of white racist domination. All those *'nasty' unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy. It is precisely that longing for the pleasure, hooks says, that has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the 'primitive' and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility.*

The primitive. Reminded me of things clients had told me before, like *I've always had a thing for Black women* and *I've always wondered what it would be like to be with a Black woman* and *I've always found Black women so sexy*. They always seemed to use the word always. There comments were like those of men who'd told me I was pretty for a dark skinned girl or the men were surprised by how articulate I was. It was as though they thought these remarks, all tinged with racial undertones, should be taken as compliments, as though I should be grateful that I exceeded their limited racist expectations, that I could help them to appease their white guilt.

The desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, writes hooks, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connections.

I once had a client, a big-shot Hollywood director, give me \$400 after an hour session that only cost \$120. When I thanked him for his generosity, he told me it was the least he could do. He said he'd grown up working class and since he now had the opportunity to give back, why not? I said thanks, but what I was really thinking was, I'm not your fucking charity case. Still, I took his money, saw it as my rendition of sticking it to the white man. After all, I would tell myself, his Captain Save a Ho mentality was no reflection of who I was as a person.¹⁴

I would later question if any good ever came from these types of potentially-revolutionary interactions, if consumption could lead to something more than personal fulfillment, mutual satisfaction, or was my optimistic thinking yet another example of what Leslie Jamison refers to as the *grand fiction of tourism*?

In an essay called Pain Tours, Jamison writes about the potentials and limits of tourist's understanding. She describes a visit to the famous silver mines of Cerro Rico in Bolivia, also known as the Mountain that Eats Men, where hundreds of thousands of poor miners have died, casualties of cave-ins, or killed by overwork, hunger, and black lung disease from the deadly dust. Tourists are taken to the local miner's market where they buy gifts for the underground workers who are doing back-to-back twelve-hour shifts in a dark hole littered with beer bottles, old clothes, and piles of human excrement.

Of the sodas and cocoa leaves they bring the men, Jamison writes: *These are gifts for the miners but really, of course, they are gifts for the givers: you will give something back, as they say, and this pleases you. You will cover your subterranean tracks.* She refers to this mindset as *the grand fiction of tourism, that bringing our bodies somewhere draws that place closer to us, or we to it.* She continues: *It's a quick fix of empathy. We take it like a shot of tequila, or a bump of coke from the key to a stranger's home. We want the inebriation of presence to dissolve the fact of difference. Sometimes the city fucks on the first date, and sometimes it doesn't. But always, always, we wake up in the morning and find that we didn't know it at all.*¹⁵

After a short silence, the German asked me if I had a boyfriend. It depended. I tried to read the client before answering, gauge if my being in a relationship might stop him from trying to cross boundaries or if my being single might make him more inclined to become a regular, feel more important. The last time I'd said yes, the client, an older white man who looked to be in his mid-50s, proceeded to offer me some unsolicited advice: Honey, I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, but any man who lets you do something like this doesn't love you.

If only there were a massage technique to treat my invisible wounds, the pain that accompanies being made to feel less than human, unworthy of love. In that moment, I was reminded of just how much we embody the psychic and physical trauma that too often accompanies being born colored, of just how visceral racism is, *to borrow from Ta-Nehisi Coates. Racism is a visceral experience*, he writes. *It dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.*¹⁶

I paused, then told the German that I didn't have a boyfriend.

The German said he couldn't believe someone so attractive and smart could be single. I could say the same thing about you, I said, smiling. He said work kept him busy and the constant traveling made relationships difficult. Then came the follow-up question that I anticipated: What kinds of guys do you like? The politically correct post-race way of asking if I dated outside my race. I always followed with the same politically correct post-race response: All kinds of guys.

There were a few clients who just came out and said it, asked if I liked white guys. One of my youngest clients, 24, told me he didn't think most Black women liked white guys, said they never seemed to pay him any attention. He was a recent college graduate, former sociology major (his explanation as to why he asked me so many questions and made so many observations). The first client I found myself physically attracted to at first glance, one of the ones that made you wonder, *Now what are you doing at a place like this?*

He told me that was single, worked long hours as a production assistant for some studio, and didn't like most of the women he met in LA. He said they all seemed like they wanted something from him, to see what he could do for them. Eventually he asked why was it that Black women didn't seem interested in white guys. I told him I'd never noticed, that it hadn't been my experience.

I always found it so funny. The excuse they all seemed to make in one form or another about being scared to approach us Black women, the fear of embarrassment and rejection. I could name off the top of my head at least ten Black women who'd gratefully accept his advances if he bothered to try. I told him all he needed to do was start a conversation, like the one we were having, that it didn't take a lot of work.

This is a fantasy, he said. It doesn't work out this way in real life. I don't know what it is but it's hard too approach you in real life. It's like there's a barrier there that separates us.

He said he was going to a party that night. I told him he should introduce himself to a Black girl at the party. If she's single, I said, I'm almost 100% sure she'll appreciate your come on.

I thought about this client recently, while reading James Baldwin one night. I decided it wasn't just fear of rejection stopping him but also fear of possibility. In facing one's fears there's

not only the possibility of having the experience fall short, but of having it surpass one's expectations. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes, *I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.*¹⁷ I see fear a similar way, in that once you face it, you are then forced to reckon with what lies beneath it, with who you really are, with what you really believe, forced to remove the armor of doubt shielding you from your true feelings, thoughts, limitations, ideologies, desires.

I wonder if he ever approached a girl at the party that night.

I told the German he could turn around, put a small pillow underneath his head. He looked up at me with a grin on his face, revealing smiling eyes and British teeth. What is it with Europeans and their teeth? I thought.

Do you mind if I touch you? he said while I massaged his chest. The kind ones did that, ask. They didn't assume they could do as they please, take what they wanted. I was grateful. How sad, I think now, that we live in a world where you come to appreciate consent like a sweet, unexpected gesture, find yourself unexplainably delighted when granted the right to your own body the way you find yourself smiling when a stranger holds open a door after months of having them closed in your face.

Sure, I said, leaning forward toward his still-cold hand. I turned to the side and he put his finger on my upper arm, about the scar on my left shoulder. My battle wound. At least that was what my best friend called it, knew it would make for a better story than admitting that I'd been attacked by a neighborhood dog while walking home from school in ninth grade. For years I wouldn't wear anything sleeveless, ashamed of having such a noticeable flaw on my already overly flawed body. I don't remember the exact moment it happened, but one day in college I bought a spaghetti strap shirt and have been wearing them ever since. Now I see my battle wound as a rite of passage of sorts, its visibility marking my acceptance of my flaws.

It adds character, the German said. For some reason, it didn't sound like a cliché coming out of his British mouth.

Three visits in nine days. The German apologized for not being able to come sooner as if he'd promised to be home early for dinner and ended up working late. His appointment was a relief after a week of clock watching, monotonous to the point that you start playing time games with yourself, swearing not to look at the clock for ten more minutes, estimating how much time has passed, how much longer before the hour's up. I lost every time.

We spent half the session in silence. The German was tired, stressed with work, took a short nap. He didn't have to tell me. I could feel the knots underneath his tattoos, kept pressing down, using my fingers to smooth out the it out. I felt him holding in his breath, then he twitched.

Sorry, I said. That too hard?

No, he said, no, Keep going. I guess I need to get that out.

The line's so thin between pleasure and pain. Like black and white, two sides of the same coin, one not able to exist without the other.

I told the German he could turn over, put a small pillow underneath his head.

Can I ask you a question? he said.

You just did, I said, smirking.

Well, another one, he said, his smile innocent like a child's.

Go for it.

Can you take that off? His hand was reaching toward my ear. That's a wig, right? he said.

I paused for a second. Yet another difference between Blacks and whites, I thought. Some things you learn early on as a Black child, one being that hair, like the radio, is something you do not touch.

Umm, no one's ever asked me that, I said.

I'm sorry, he said. He said he wasn't trying to offend me, just wanted to look into my eyes.

I hated when they said that, when they stared, when anyone stared. I felt like one of those tribal people who refused to take pictures, believing a photograph can steal a soul, imprisoning it within its film.¹⁸

In retrospect, it wasn't just the looking, but the looking back, the possibility of not being seen but being seen through. Not to mention, I truly do believe the eyes are the windows into the soul, and this might send us both to hell.

I reached for the wig slowly, pulled out the bobby pins from the edges keeping it secure against my scalp, peeled it off, tossed it on the chair on top of his clothes, leaving visible the full head weave I'd just gotten done, 16 inches of straight Black Brazilian hair, two and a half bundles, bangs still covering most of my eyes.

He looked at me all wide eyed and grinning like I'd just given him a gift. I tried to keep from laughing. If only you knew.

Finally, the German said, I can see those beautiful eyes of yours.

After he got dressed, I came back in the room with a bottle of water. He sat it on the table, asked a question. Do you ever do two girls?

You mean like four-hand? I said. I'd heard about it before, saw it advertised on some of the body rub ads when I skimmed the adult sites to check out the competition.

Yes, that. It looks interesting, he said.

Like that, the fantasy was gone as quickly as it had come over me.

I tried to keep the anger from making its way to my facial expression. *I thought I was special*, I wanted to say. *This must be how wives and girlfriends feel when their men come home asking for threesomes. Inadequate. Am I boring you that much? Are you tired of me? Ready for a younger model?*

Even with the different name, different persona, I still wasn't one of those girls who could easily separate fantasy and reality, blur the line without losing my balance. No matter the side, I still had trouble committing to memory that men came because they wanted to fall in love for a little while, not actually be in love, that things didn't mean what I pretended they meant. In that moment, I felt like reciting the monologue from *Valentine's Day* when Jennifer Garner realizes she's been in a relationship with a married man: *It's like the universe saying, look, remember when you were fourteen and you had cystic acne and braces and you played the saxophone in the marching band and no one would invite you to the winter formal? Well nothing's changed.*¹⁹

I'll see what I can do, I said to the German through slightly gritted teeth.

I asked the new girl Chelsea if she was interested in four-hand. I figured she could use the money since she'd mentioned in our first conversation that she was a single mom and her ex was a deadbeat and she needed to buy her son new school clothes. She agreed without hesitating, said she'd follow my lead since it would be her first time doing four-hand.

The German came in a week later. I pretended to have confidence.

I'll follow your lead, Chelsea said, since it's your client. I took the right side of the massage table, she the left. When I massaged a shoulder, she massaged the other shoulder. When I moved to the arm and leg, she moved to the other arm and leg.

Nothing like porn movies. The German didn't ask to watch us make out or touch each other. He just lay there with his face tucked into the hole of the face cradle, enjoying the feel of four oily hands sliding over his body.

How does it feel? I asked him a few times. Great, he said each time. Really great. Nothing else. I took his silence as satisfaction.

When it was time for him turn around I told Chelsea she could leave. We may have sold happy endings.

SORRY, NO GHETTO OR BLACK GUYS: AN ESSAY

For perhaps the last fifty years there has been a growing distrust, even hatred, between black men and black women. It has been nursed along, not only by racism on the part of whites, but by an almost deliberate ignorance on the part of blacks about the sexual politics of their experience in this country.²⁰

—MICHELLE WALLACE

We have to change our own mind... We've got to change our own minds about each other. We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to come together with warmth.²¹

—MALCOLM X

We are not done with slavery because we have yet to thoroughly investigate its psychic life.²²

—SHARON PATRICIA HOLLAND

It was my second week working at the Office, my first night working alone. A man called around 8 to make an appointment for 8:30. I could tell he was Black as soon as he spoke.²³ The subtle shading of vowels, common cadences of Black speech rooted in the rural South. I debated telling him what I told most Black men who called, that I was booked for the rest of the day, to call me back tomorrow knowing I wouldn't pick up the phone. Then I thought about my empty gas tank and gave him the address.

Thirty minutes later I opened the door to a dark-skinned Black man, overweight, and scruffy-faced. He was about 5'9 in baggy jeans and an oversized t-shirt, reminded me of Rick Ross.

I told him he could follow me to the back. He stopped in the lobby, looked around, then trailed behind me. I opened the door to Room 3, gave my spiel. You can get undressed, I said, lay down on the table, and I'll be back in a few minutes.

Nah, you good, he said. He sat on the massage table, facing the wall, reached into his pocket. I spotted a glint of gold, the corner of a magnum wrapper.

I froze.

You gonna sit on it or what? he said, ripping open the condom packaging.

I'm sorry, we don't do that here.

You a cop or something? he asked.

Like I would tell you if I was, I thought to myself. No, I said, are you?

No, fuck I look like?

I stayed silent and close to the door.

Sorry, I repeated, we don't do that. I tried to sound more stern this time. You can go if you want. I hoped that was what he wanted, to go.

He stood up, zipped his pants, hurled a bunch of grunts and curses in the darkness. They hit hard. He stuck his hand in his pocket, pulled out a thick wad of cash, flipped through to the single dollar bills. I watched as he crumpled up four or five of them, throw them in my face. I just stood there, mouth open as the bills fell on the massage table and floor.

Then, with a smile on his face, he said, Go get yourself some dinner.

Like two native anthropologists in spandex dresses and five inch heels.

It was a month after the incident with the scruffy-faced, money-throwing client. One of my last days in New York before heading back to L.A. I was standing beside my best friend Melissa on the second floor balcony of Perfections, a seedy strip club in Queens, New York. I'd asked Melissa to come with me to the club after hearing on the radio that Juelz Santana, a Harlem rapper whose lyrics I'd memorized since middle school, would be there that night celebrating his birthday.

We watched Juelz and his entourage, ten or twelve Black guys in fitteds and designer belts, from the edge of VIP. Hands gripping metal poles, watered down drinks, perfectly rolled blunts like paintbrushes made of wet tobacco leaves. A flame burned in the background as a guy sitting in one of the torn leather chairs dried his brush.

I stared at one of the dancers' faces as she made her ass clap on the small stage in the back of the balcony. She was light skinned and shaped like a Coca Cola bottle, reminded me of Diamond from *Player's Club*.

*Make the money; don't let it make you ... Closed legs don't get fed.*²⁴

While the men gawked at her ass, I just shook my head, thankful it wasn't me.

There are hierarchies in the industry, like everywhere else. High-end escorts at the top and streetwalkers at the bottom, in-between, BDSM mistresses, masseuses, phone sex operators, lower-end escorts, web cam and porn actresses, exotic dancers, video vixens.²⁵ Would take time for me to realize these man-made hierarchies were part of what kept me going, kept us going, what allowed us to return to work each day. Having other women to compare ourselves to, to reassure ourselves how different we were from the popular definition of a real prostitute. Once in a while, I'd be sitting in the Office with Veronica and Eva, scrolling through the adult ads, comparing prices and services, saying how sorry we felt for the girls offering sex for half of what we charged for a massage, patting ourselves on the back for not being like those girls. Those girls who sold sex, took their clothes off for rooms full of strangers, had money thrown in their faces.

These women were a *reassuring presence*. That's how Caroline Knapp describes a fellow alcoholic in her memoir *Drinking: A Love Story*. *She was very helpful to me for a very long time*, Knapp writes, *symbolizing not what I feared I might become but what, for the moment, I wasn't*.²⁶ When I read those words, I knew exactly what she meant. I thought about how strippers and escorts had been so useful to me, how I used them to make myself feel better about my position in society, about the reality that even though I'd graduated from an ivy league university, I still couldn't find a decent full time job that would pay me more than I'd make taking off my clothes. I thought about how, in a way, we all use black women as a reassuring presence, a measuring stick of how far we are from the bottom, of what we are grateful we are not. Part of a long legacy of being taught to look down on Black women—from myths of the unrapeable black woman used during slavery to justify our sexual abuse at the hands of her master, to TV shows and movies portraying Black women as loud and angry, to songs calling Black women bitches

and baby mamas, hoochies, hoes, thots, gold diggers, jump-offs, sluts, scallywags. In the words of Malcolm X, *The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman.*

Music meshed with the smell of marijuana. I watched as a few of the guys took out stacks of hundred dollar bills, took photos with the stacks of hundred dollar bills, then put them back in a bag and replaced them with the singles they would use for the rest of the night to make it rain.

Look at those bitches, thirsty ass hoes, one of guys said after tossing some singles from the second floor down to the first near the main stage. As the money fell, a flock of women ran towards it, bent down on all fours, crawling to collect it and knocking each other over in the process.

So sad, I thought as I watched the men making it rain and the women willing to get wet. *So sad that we live in a world where Black men have such little power that they feel the need to make it rain in strip clubs and massage rooms and music videos to feel like they have some authority.*²⁷

For the rest of the night, I felt a mixture of anger and pity and a false sense of superiority. There had been times I'd felt guilty for not taking Black clients (while still patting myself on the back for not being like those women who put racist disclaimers in their ads). But listening to those men, watching that money fall on the floor the way the money had fallen on the massage table in Room 3 confirmed some things for me. I had to deal with Black men mimicking the abuse and violence white men used against us during slavery in enough areas of my life—in the form of catcalls while walking down the street, childhood beatings at the hands of my father, stories of cousins and uncles hitting their wives and girlfriends, rap songs calling women bitches and hoes, movies glorifying pimp culture.²⁸ If I could, I would limit these interactions as much as possible at work. Privileged white men were more than enough.

Of course while I was judging Juelz and his crew, it didn't occur to me then that I was just like them. I may not have been using the same words or throwing the same money, but I was as guilty as they were in imitating the same mentality and values that have been used for centuries

to keep us in our place. These binaries that we subscribe to (good/bad, virgin/whore, black/white, rich/poor) are just ways that society keeps us in our place, divides and conquers, leaving no room for the messiness of our identities, which cannot be confined to an identity that forces us to negate another. As Cornel West understands it, *Black people will never value themselves as long as they subscribe to a standard of valuation that devalues them.*

I was at a writing workshop trying to finish up my dissertation when I decided to write an essay on black clients. Actually, it began as an essay describing a day in the life of a black sensual masseuse and somehow turned into a rant-rumination-journal entry on discrimination in the commercial sex industry and the large amounts of women who don't take black clients. It begins:

They tried to warn me about taking Black clients. I don't take 'em, one girl had told me. They're too aggressive ... Not only do they cross the line, they don't even tip ... They'll try to pimp you out ... They're extra touchy, always want as much as they can get for their money. I didn't realize this was a buffet. I must've missed the all you can eat sign ... They think since we're both Black, it should be free and they can get whatever they want.

Then there were the ads—the body rub ads, escort ads, stripper ads. White, Black, Latina, Asian, all the same:

NO BLACK GUYS PLEASE
SORRY NO GHETTO OR BLACK GUYS
ABSOLUTELY NO BLACK MEN
NO THUGS
NO BLACKS, MEXICANS, OR PUNJABS
WHITE MEN ONLY²⁹

Before I read my rant-rumination-journal entry aloud, I explained to the six other writers in the room that I'd been struggling with this topic for a while, hesitant of putting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) out of fear that I might perpetuate I was scared of popular stereotypes of Black men as violent criminals,³⁰ that I might write what Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie calls the single story. In a 2009 Ted Talk called *The Danger of a Single Story*, the famous African author talks about effects of telling a single story of a person or place, how when you show someone or some country as the same thing over and over, it eventually becomes that thing. *The single story creates stereotypes, she says, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete ... The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.* What I didn't tell the class was that black women have a special, complicated relationship to representations of black men, a long history of hiding intimate partner violence and rape and physical, mental, and verbal use at the hands of black men to protect the community. To air our dirty laundry, we'd been taught, was to be a race traitor, yet another castrating Black woman who was just as bad, if not worse, than the white man.³¹

When I was done reading, the instructor Elana asked me to read it again, then assured me that in spite of my reservations, my story still needed to be told. The class agreed. Then she asked me what I personally thought was the reason women didn't take Black clients. I said I couldn't speak for all women but knew that part of it had to do with centuries-old stereotypes of Black men as animals and brutes, natural born rapists and criminals, myths created during slavery to excuse the beating and lynching of black men that continue to hold sway over one hundred years later in the minds and imaginations of an entire nation.

Since we finished our 90-minute workshop about fifteen minutes early, I was given more time to publicly think through my dilemma. I told the class about the book in my bag, *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and Its Women* by Alexa Albert, an ethnography by a former Harvard medical student who conducted a public-health study at the Mustang Ranch brothel in Nevada.³² I told them about brothel protocol. According to Albert, when a customer arrives at the Mustang Ranch, a bell signals the women to come out of their rooms and line up. That is, unless the visitor is

Black. Black men have a separate bell. Coming out is optional. Before that, in the 70s, there was a separate trailer in the back for Black clients.

I asked if anyone had seen the movie *Full Metal Jacket*. They hadn't. There's a scene where a group of American soldiers are hanging on the street and a Vietnamese man on a motorcycle approaches them with a prostitute. The Vietnamese man says a price, promises the woman will suck and fuck. The Black soldier, Eightball, takes him up on the offer, but the woman declines, says he's too big (*soul brother too beaucoup*). Eightball then unzips his pants and says, What we have here, little yellow sister, is a magnificent specimen of pure Alabama black snake. But it ain't to goddamn beaucoup. The woman's eyes widen with the desire and disgust that has met the black body for centuries, and she accepts his offer.³³

Three of my white clients had mentioned the scene when I asked them why they thought masseuses didn't take Black clients. I'd asked fifteen of my regulars—middle-aged white men—what they thought about the no Black men signs in the adult ads. My attempt at figuring out if women's discrimination affected how white men viewed Black men. They all said they hadn't thought about it. Well, why do you think they put it? I'd follow up with. Most settled on penis size. They probably think it'll hurt...Maybe they don't want to stretch their vaginas.

But a lot of the women who write this aren't even offering sex, I would follow up with. They gave similar replies, said maybe the women just weren't attracted to them, that Black men probably weren't their type. Maybe they just prefer white guys. I wondered if there was a difference between preference and prejudice, and if so, how could you tell?³⁴

Elana told me to keep writing when I got home.

Later that night, I did what I usually do when stuck. I read. I read old notes from interviews with Eva, Veronica, and Alice. I'd asked each of them their thoughts on Black clients. Eva said she was skeptical about Black clients at first. She'd worked as an escort booker and driver and the first rule she was told by the owner was, No niggas, no esses. She said she felt bad about

discriminating against Black men the same way people discriminated against us, and realized that it wasn't race that was the issue but class and culture. Like Indian men, she said, they're usually more touchy and don't tip. It wasn't necessarily that they were cheap, she'd learned, but that tipping wasn't common in Asia.

Eva also said she felt bad doing what was being done to us. The same way women refused Black clients, most studios refused to hire Black women, some owners even wrote in their ad disclaimers like NO BLACK WOMEN. We were all part of the same history, a history that had made our dark skin a marker of difference, inferiority, over-sexed, sexually-aggressive deviance.³⁵ Veronica only took men over forty, said Black men were fine as long as they sounded intelligent on the phone, came at her correct. None of that hey baby. Alice summed up her view of all clients in three words: money is money. Over time, I'd started to see things from their perspectives. A combination of guilt, growth, and moving to Philadelphia, a mostly Black city, where I massaged from my apartment. After the move, I started taking more Black clients, listening for cues over the phone as to whether or not they sounded respectful—if they asked for illegal services or a discount, if they yelled or cursed, made me feel less than human.

I looked at interview notes with white clients and the section of Brothel about Black client protocol. The comments made me think of lynch mobs, black bodies burning and hanging from ropes, the mutilated black penis passed around a gleeful audience, pieces taken home as souvenirs. The connection between my clients, the boyfriends of women at Mustang Ranch, and the men and women at lynching picnics: the large Black penis, the BBC, the Black phallus.

After the Civil War, white men and women and children would congregate in parks and town squares for lynching picnics. With cameras in hand and picnic baskets, they'd cheer as black bodies were roped and tied to trees, tortured for hours, castrated. Sometimes the black men were made to eat parts of their testicles before their bodies were burned to a crisp. While white Southern often claimed their heinous acts were carried out to protect the honor and security of their white women from the dangerous Black male rapist, the accusations of rape were often illegitimate, covers for consensual—and taboo—relationships between Black men and white women.³⁶ *Whites could not countenance the idea of a white woman desiring sex with a*

*Negro, according to historian Philip Dray, thus any physical relationship between a white woman and a black man had, by definition, to be an unwanted assault.*³⁷

Behind myths of Black hypersexuality and criminality was fear—fear of black autonomy, fear of black retaliation for all the wrongs committed against Black bodies and souls, fear of the supposed contamination and extermination of the white race.³⁸ This fear was expressed in the form of sexual exploitation of enslaved women, the brutalization of enslaved men and lynching of free Blacks burning, anti-miscegenation laws, speeches given by white Southern leaders. *We of the South have never recognized the right of the Negro to govern white men, and we never will,* stated Senator Benjamin Tillman on the Senate floor in 1900. *We have never believed him to be equal to the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him.*³⁹

Over one hundred years later, on June 7, 2014, this same fear and paranoia led 21-year-old white supremacist Dylann Storm Roof to Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina—one of the nation's oldest Black churches—where he killed nine Black worshippers, six women and three men, during bible study. According to Sylvia Johnson, a cousin of the reverend killed in the shooting, Roof reloaded five times and said, *I have to do it. You rape our women, and you're taking over our country, and you have to go.*⁴⁰

Next, I went back to the question I'd posed during the workshop: Is there a difference between preference and prejudice, and if so, how can you tell?⁴¹ I searched the Internet for information on race and desire and discrimination.⁴² In 2015, a group of Australian sex researchers published a study called *Is Sexual Racism Really Racism?* They wanted to understand why so many gay men put disclaimers like NO BLACKS AND NO ASIANS in their dating profiles yet claim they are not racist. After asking over 2,000 gay and bisexual Australian men how they felt about race and dating, they concluded: *Sexual racism... is closely associated with generic racist attitudes, which challenges the idea of racial attraction as solely a matter of personal preference.*

While it may feel like our desires are our own, in reality they are influenced heavily by social norms, explains sex researcher Denton Callander. *The findings...are a reminder that even*

*though society and individuals may actively reject racism, racial prejudices are increasingly subtle and...find their way into even the most private and personal corners of our lives.*⁴³

In her book *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland writes about the relationship between race, racism, and desire, specifically how the legacy of slavery continues to affect our everyday practices and the personal and political dimensions of our erotic lives. She touches on the erotic and spatial elements of racism, how slavery and segregation worked to separate bodies from interacting and touching out of fear of interracial sex and the tainting of the pure white race. In our world of differences, distance, and misunderstandings, Holland offers touch as both a violation and potential site of transformation. Touch, she writes, *can alter the very idea as well as the actuality of relationships, morphing friends into enemies and strangers into intimates. For touch can encompass empathy as well as violation, passivity as well as active aggression. It can be safely dangerous, or dangerously safe. It also carries a message about the immediate present, the possible future, and the problematic past. Finally, touch crosses boundaries, in fact and imagination.*

James Baldwin's short story *Going to Meet the Man*, opens with Jesse, a racist white sheriff, lying in bed with his wife, unable to get it up. To get aroused, Jesse conjures images of blackness and violence like Viagra: the black women he regularly harasses, the Black prisoner he'd tortured earlier in the day, sticking him with a cattle prod with fascination and rage. Jesse starts to tremble in bed as he *felt very close to a very peculiar, particular joy* at the thought of his Black victim lying on the ground, jerking and moaning. 258

Something deep from within Jesse's memory resurfaces: his first mob lynching that he attended with his parents as a child where he watched the public torture and murder of a black man accused of committing a crime against a white woman. From atop his father's shoulders, Jesse witnesses the sexual fascination with and castration of the lynch mob victim. The lust, longing, and fear in the eyes of the crowd. The leader of the mob, the long bright knife in his

hand, as he approaches his victim. He, Baldwin writes, *took the nigger's privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing ... and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten ... The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them. Then the dying man's eyes looked straight into Jesse's eyes—it could not have been as long as a second, but it seemed longer than a year. Then Jesse screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came roaring down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing.*⁴⁴

The story ends with Jesse returning to the present, in bed with his wife, something boiling inside him, making him horny and hard. He grabs his wife gently and tells her that he is going to have sex with her like a Black man. *Come on, sugar, he demands, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger.*

I had my last Black client in April 2015. He was an attractive man in his mid-30s, an amber-russet complexion and slight Midwestern twang. I walked him to the massage room, told him to change and lay on the massage table while I heated up some towels. When I walked back inside, I found him naked standing beside the massage table stroking himself while looking down at his cellphone. He put the screen close to my face. Which one do you like? he asked. It was a collage of naked Black men, their large hard and flaccid dicks taking up the majority of each shot.

He spent the hour scrolling through the website, stopping each time something caught his eye, clicking on the image to enlarge it, and if it met his needs he'd stare at it for a while as he played with himself.

Damn, that's a big dick, he said. How you like that one?

I said it was nice.

His eyes glazed over. I just want to put the whole thing in my mouth, he said.

I asked him why he didn't just do it. What I was really thinking was why the hell did you call me? He said his girlfriend wouldn't approve.

Trust me, he said, I'm completely straight, I'm not gay at all. He would remind me of his being straight every five minutes or so, in between pressing his pointer finger against another photo on his iPhone. He said the black dick obsession was a recent development. He'd had a threesome with his girlfriend and while he was under his girl penetrating her vagina and the other guy, whom they met at a bar, was on top penetrating her ass, the guy's big ass black dick touched his thigh and he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since. He asked if I knew any men who'd let him suck their penis. I didn't. He seemed desperate. I oscillated feeling bad and wondering how I was supposed to feel. He told me to just rub his chest while he kept looking at photos.

As I walked him to the door, I told him I'd keep a lookout. He smiled and said, Thanks. Just make sure you're discreet when you text me.

III. DUALITY & THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

Duality & The Emotional Labor Of Black Womanhood elaborates earlier concerns regarding representation, identity, and performance, particularly the effects of misrepresentation of racialized bodies in mainstream media on Black women's conceptions of self and their (de)valuation in society, and the complex desires, negotiations, and self-making practices of Black women subjects. Profiling two masseuses—Eva, a Black two-something aspiring actress from Chicago, and Veronica, a mixed-race fifty-something computer programmer, licensed masseuse, escort, and BDSM mistress—these essays use individual experiences to explore broad issues, such as identity, representation, sexuality, and what Eva refers to as "duality" (a concept similar to DuBois' notion of "double consciousness"), as well as the ways these women negotiate such obstacles in late capitalist America and a culture of long standing silence around Black female sexuality. As Evelyn Hammonds points out, "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized."¹ Resistance includes challenging and negotiating traditional notions of race, gender, and respectability, recreating ourselves, and telling our stories.

CROOKED ROOMS, LOCKED DOORS: AN ESSAY

[T]hat's all Hollywood is, is locks. A whole bunch of closed doors...When you just imagine that there's one type of voice that's really being pushed to the forefront is the white male voice. In terms of cinema, it's really clear that the rest of us are locked out...So, yeah, it's a whole bunch of locked doors.²

—AVA DUVERNAY

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.³

—MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.⁴

—AUDRE LORDE

The first time I got in the passenger seat of Eva's '99 Chevy Cavalier with the dented Illinois license plate, last two digits 88, the number of perfection, we were going on a weave hunt. Eva needed the perfect ponytail for an upcoming audition—it had to be curly, preferably loose bohemian curls and dark brown, number 10—and I just wanted to get out of the Office. Could've gone after work or over the weekend, but that was what we did, found errands to run, went for walks or drives to get food when we had the money to spare, worked hard at keeping busy.

It was the end of January of 2011, the final days of a week-long warm spell, highs in the 80s, heat rising from the hot and dry pavement like steam from a coffee mug. We headed east, deeper into Inglewood, into the hood. I stared out the window, watching as we drove past a stretch of two star motels, fast food restaurants, graffiti covered bus stops, the color line. A five-minute drive from the Office had a way of making the sun seem like a sick joke. Hard to believe we were in the middle of the American Dream—more like the edge. Ten miles south of Hollywood. Fifteen miles from Beverly Hills. A forty minute drive from the happiest place on earth.

If you looked high enough, you might even glimpse the rows of flush, gated enclaves nestled in the rolling hills, smell the salt from the Pacific Ocean and beaches a lot of people around here would never step foot on.

I thought about the movie *Baby Boy*—what I thought about every time I drove around South LA, I think a combination of the palm trees, Pollo Locos, congregations of Black men on street corners, in front of bodegas smoking, sipping from brown paper bags. In *Baby Boy*, actor slash singer Tyrese Gibson plays 20-year-old Jody Summers, a young Black man from South Central attempting to mature in a world determined to stunt his growth. The movie opens with an image of grown ass Jody asleep in fetal position in his mother's womb as he recites a voiceover about Afrocentrist psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing and her theory on Black men in America: *She says because of the system of racism in this country, the black man is meant to think of himself as a baby. A not yet fully formed being, who has not yet realized his full potential. To support her claim, she offers the following: First off, what does a black man call his woman? Mama. Secondly, what does a black man call his closest acquaintances? His boys. And finally, what does a black man call his place of residence? The crib.*

I looked over at Eva as she sat upright behind the wheel at a red light, hands at 9 and 3. She smiled, her perfect little teeth like white Chiclets. Her smile took me back to the first time we met. Alice was giving me a tour of the Office, and when she opened the door to Room 5, there she was. Eva, Alice said, this is Crystal, she's going to be working with us. I was Crystal. Hi, Eva said, smiling. She had skin the color of cornflakes, big brown eyes, and an even bigger smile, a smile, according to one of her clients, that made you feel comfortable. Safe. She put down a half folded towel so she could wave. Nice to meet you, she said. I remember she sounded like she meant it, and she had a slight southern accent that reminded me of my family down south. She sounded like home.

I considered doing my impression of Yvette, Jody's girlfriend and the mother of his child. Jody, Jody, Jody...You been fuckin' around on me?...Let me smell ya dick. But I stayed silent. Eva's impersonations put mine to shame. She was an aspiring actress with a knack for observing people and imitating them, nailing dialects. Sometimes in Room 5, she'd do the best impressions

of our boss, Rhonda.

Y'all gone have men buying y'all all types of stuff, she'd say with her hand on her hip, her body weight and lip tilted to one side. She'd talk in a real raspy voice, stopping every few seconds to make that bird noise Black girls make sometimes, sounds like you're popping chewing gum but there's nothing in your mouth. They gone get you nice bags and shoes and stuff. Even with her unglossed mouth twisted to one side, she still looked cute. Eva was girl-next-door beautiful, the kind of girl men liked because she was attractive but not too attractive, you knew there was a chance. She had skin the color of cornflakes, a baby face and grown woman's body, large breasts and thick thighs always compressed in her work uniform: a pair of leggings, a tank top, and worn chestnut Uggs. Rhonda would get mad at her in the beginning. Girl, put on some shoes, she'd say. Get you some heels or borrow some of mine. Eva never bought or borrowed shoes. I'd rather be comfortable, she said. They're just gonna try to rip my clothes off anyway. I bought shoes.

And make sure you treat them nice and stuff, make 'em feel good, Eva would continue, her voice all brassy and curt. She was like Wanda Sykes with her ease of delivery, how she captured the nuances and inflections of Black vernacular speech. I'd stare in awe, wondering, how did she end up here? Watching her was like driving through South Central on a sunny day, found yourself wondering how something could be so beautiful and so sad at the same time. Yeah, we needed the laughter to bring some light to that windowless Office, the artificial light giving it the feel of a casino, but it still hurt knowing her routine should've been behind a camera instead of some closed door in a rub-and-tug.

Eva said the job was temporary, something to pay the bills while she worked on her acting career. Like her family that had moved from rural Mississippi to Chicago during the Great Migration, Eva moved to Los Angeles in search of better, and like her family in Chicago, she would learn that golden dreams only came gold plated for people like us. When Langston Hughes visited LA in 1932, he said it seemed more like a miracle than a city, *a place where oranges sold for one cent a dozen, ordinary Black folks lived in huge houses with miles of yards, and prosperity seemed to reign in spite of the Depression...* Seven years later, when Hughes attempted to work

within the studio system, he discovered that the only available role for a Black writer was *furnishing demeaning dialogue for cotton-field parodies of Black life*. After a humiliating experience with the film *Way Down South*, Hughes declared that *so far as Negroes are concerned, [Hollywood] might just as well be controlled by Hitler*.

Eva had been a child actress back home, part of the urban theatre circuit—a revamped version of the earlier chitlin’ circuit—and wanted to continue her acting career. After high school, she moved to LA and enrolled in an acting conservatory, took on odd-jobs to pay the bills: entertainer at children’s parties, valet parking girl, escort driver and booker, then masseuse. The escorts would always say, you’re really pretty, you should do this, Eva said. But I never had the guts or the desire to sleep with a bunch of men, especially for money, plus I hadn’t had sex yet. So one of the escorts told me about sensual massaging. Topless, hand job. I figured hey, I can handle that. I’ve always been one to tread the water, stick my toe in without going all the way.

Treading water. What the job was also about, finding a balance so you didn’t get too deep. Reminded me of Omar Epps in the movie *In Too Deep*. He plays Jeff “J. Reid” Cole, a young Black cop who gets an undercover assignment posing as a drug dealer his first day out of the academy so he can help bring down the crack empire of Dwayne “God” Gittens (played by LL Cool J). His superiors are impressed with how quickly he gains God’s trust, but his boss also notices that his behavior has changed, worries that the line between good cop and bad guy is getting blurred, that both identities are becoming one and starting to affect his morals. After making some questionable choices, Cole helps bring God down, testifies against him and the organization in court, and also puts in a good word for Breezy T., a member of God’s crew, to help him get his sentence reduced. God gets two back-to-back life sentences. In the last scenes, Cole’s in the car with his girl listening to a press conference on the radio, during which his boss takes all the credit. His girl reminds him that he did all the work. It ends with Cole teaching a bunch of new young officers about undercover work and the importance of never losing your cover but also never getting too deep.

I was expecting life to be easier if I did the right thing, Eva told me. I went to acting school, I didn’t do anything horrible, I worked hard, I did kid’s parties and everything, worked as

an actor's assistant, and I was like everything is gonna pay off and it just didn't happen like that. You could hear the confusion in her tone, sense the feeling that life had promised her something when she was younger and failed to keep its end of the bargain.

She didn't realize when she moved to LA just how vastly underrepresented Black women were both in front of and behind the camera, that she had a better chance running for Office than winning an Oscar, that she would have to deal with the double bind actors of color have been negotiating for over a century: either accept stereotypical roles and chance increasing damage to self and group identity or refuse stereotypical roles and face economic hardship. Neither of us knew we'd have this same double bind working at the Office.

We stepped outside into a muggy plaza parking lot, the heat hanging like dry clothes. A bell rang when we walked inside the beauty supply store, a huge DISCOUNT YAKI sign in the window. Two sets of eyes followed us around the fluorescent-lit aisles as we scanned the hair section: synthetic, human, regular virgin, remy virgin, yaki, braiding hair, weaving hair, clip ins, ponytails. Eva said she had never worn weave until she moved to LA. Back home, she said, we just got relaxers. I asked her if she wore extensions for herself or for other people, to make herself whiter, because my mother was always pestering me to take my weave out, blasting India Arie's *I am not my hair* while looking at old photos and saying, One day I'm gonna see your hair again.

I do it for me, Eva said. I like the way it looks on me and I know clients like it. They like beautiful things. I felt the same. I'd tried every style over the years: relaxer, fro, braids, curly weaves, straight weaves, china bangs, swoop bangs, bobs. I knew what made me look best—long black extensions with bangs across my forehead. And clients agreed. You had to be strategic, figure out what you were and weren't willing to negotiate, change. We all wore fake hair at the Office, long, straight, or wavy weaves and wigs. Part of the performance. They may have wanted you to be Black, but not too Black.

A few days later Eva walked into Room 5 with a look of disgust on her face—her sun-kissed button nose all scrunched up like she'd just driven through rotten Jersey wastelands. The first

time I'd ever seen Eva not smiling. Yuck, that man is gross, she said. Before we could ask what she was talking about, she said, I'll tell y'all in a minute. She walked over to the towel warmer in the lobby to get some hand cloths to wipe the gross client down. I sat impatiently, my laptop resting on my bare legs. Veronica sat on the edge of the love seat, changing out of her work outfit, a short silky black dress, and back into the jeans and tee-shirt she'd left her house in.

Eva had the same look when she came back. She said the man who just left kept trying to grope her, treated her like she was dumb.

They think just because I do this that I can't be smart, she would tell me later. Like I'm some wayward girl who needs help and an education and only do this job because I live some hard street life. We're not all like that. It's crazy how surprised they are when they actually talk to me that I am very articulate and that I can complete a sentence and I know a lot about things outside of just sex and I can hold a conversation. We're not all stupid!

Duality. That was the word Eva would use to describe what it took to last in the industry. I have a different type of identity, she said, when I asked her about how she dealt with clients. But in a way it's still me. I never give the clients a lot. They always ask crazy questions, like where am I from, where do I live, why do I do this, and I just make something up because I don't want them to know who I really am. And I really feel like it's none of their business. This is just a job for me. This isn't a way of life. They don't need to know anything about Monica (the name on her birth certificate). They can know whatever they want about Eva, but it ends right there at the end of the session.

You can burn out because guys feel like, I'm paying you, I can do whatever I want to you and they don't respect you and it's not cool and you know you're more than that and you're not that type of girl to just do anything for a dime. But then again, she continued, you do have those guys that are respectful of you and understand that they're not gonna get more than you're willing to give. They understand it's just a sensual massage and they don't try to take it beyond that. But there are a lot of guys who don't care. They pay you the money, they want what they want. And you should give it to them.

You have to remember it's not you, Eva warned me. That's where that duality comes in.

Her words reminded me of *double consciousness*, a term I first heard in an Africana Studies class in college. W.E.B. Du Bois uses the phrase to describe the internal struggle of Black people in America, constantly trying to be both Black and American. He writes: *It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*⁵

After a few months at the Office, I noticed Eva started going to less auditions and middle-of-the-day rehearsals. While I enjoyed the company in the Office during the lull hours and days of few calls and fewer appointments, when we silently and not so silently hoped for a last minute session before calling it a night, I hated that she was out in the world living her dream. She said roles for Black women were hard to come by and it was all about who you know. I didn't grow up with a silver spoon in my mouth, she said. And she was tired of being typecast in ghetto roles in South Central, usually written by white writers in Hollywood with little knowledge about Black people outside of what they themselves learned from other movies and shows.⁶

I didn't know at the time that she'd also been diagnosed with lupus, that she was chronically tired, battling lupus fatigue and the depression that came with it, alternating prescription medications and alternative healing and drug-free approaches. She hid it well. Like functioning alcoholics, smiles, silence, humor veiled the depths of our despair. Inside versus outside. Perception versus reality. Was she not suffocating behind that mask? Was I not?

Within two years, Eva would quit working at the Office, enroll in massage school to get her license so she could work someplace more upscale and legitimate, and graduate top of her class. She got two jobs, one at a national massage chain that didn't pay well but looked good on her resume, the other working with Veronica at some lavish day spa with extras. She stopped acting. When I asked her if she still wanted to act, she said yes, but that it was discouraging and she had

other things she wanted to do in life. I want to act, she said, but I want so much to get financially together. I couldn't see myself being 30 and still living with a roommate. I want to be a little more settled. I'm tired of being concerned about money. I've learned so much about the business, in and out, and it really is all about who you know and how much you'll sell out and I'm just not ready to jump back into that anyway. I wanna just focus on working and trying a life for myself because I do want to have kids, I do want to get married and all that type of stuff. and I can't do that if I'm just looking for a dream of anything you want.

The last time I saw Eva was at her thirtieth birthday party. She invited a bunch of her friends over to her new apartment in a renovated low rise complex in Inglewood, a few blocks from the Office that no longer existed (Rhonda was on number seven or eight by then). Eva was so excited about her apartment, her first place with just her name on the lease. She smiled just telling you the wifi password.

There were about twenty-five people scattered throughout the living room and dining area, red cups and plates in hands. She had an eclectic group of friends, like the cast of a Shonda Rhimes series: Black, white, Latina, ambiguous, dark, light, tall, short, chubby, fit, thick. She said most of them were her friends from acting school. None of them were actors. We ate, drank, played party games. I spent most of the night on the sofa watching Eva move from crowd to crowd, making sure not to leave anyone out. She looked even more beautiful than usual with her bronze and purple eye makeup shimmering in the light like it was trying to compete with her smile. Her brown hair was thickened and wavy with extensions that stopped at her shoulders. She was bigger than before, said the lupus had gotten worse and that she didn't have energy to move for months. She must've caught me studying her because she stopped what she was doing, looked at me, and gave me a smile. Suddenly I wanted to go over and hug her, for no other reason than she saw me.

Someone started a game of Taboo—my team won—then guessing games on an iPad. Everyone made jokes in between, mostly about Eva and her past jobs. I learned that one woman was Eva's old boss from the valet service. Another woman, one of her friends from acting school,

had worked with her driving. The whole night I kept thinking, Where am I? Is this real? They were all so comfortable with themselves, their jobs, their lives, even with their husbands there. Half of them were married. they were all so normal (minus the one woman with the uncanny ability to recite the cast members and release dates of almost any movie that had won an Oscar). Maybe there was a place for me.

You remember, the girl standing across from me said all loud to signal that we needed to listen, we'd be at dinner and Eva's phone would ring and she'd put on her sexy phone voice. Eva joined in, standing in the center of the room like it was made just for her, mimicking her old booker voice. hello, she said in a sultry tone, this is Lana. we all laughed. Then the cake. Eva did a happy dance, combining a two-step and cabbage patch, while we sang three versions of happy birthday: the original, the Stevie Wonder version, and the Chuck E. Cheese song (I didn't know that one, and I felt them judging me for the first time because of it). Said she was so happy because it was her first ice cream cake.

At the end of the night, Eva sat on her knees in front of the living room table with all the birthday bags and boxes spread across it. I never knew gift-opening could be such an elaborate, drawn-out process. She made everyone be quiet, opened each gift real slow. First she read the card. There was something special about people like her, who didn't just shake a card hoping money would fall out. Who took in every word like the card had been written with them in mind, kept them all together years later some place safe like they were precious metal. I watched her unwrap my present with a surgeon's precision, not yet aware that in two weeks she'd tell me she'd been raped by a client when we first started. I called her for some more information for my dissertation and when I asked her about drawing boundaries with clients, she told me.

Every time I've gone downtown to do an outcall, she said, it was always a bad experience. And there was this one guy, and I don't know if you call it rape or not 'cause I didn't want it, but I was at the J.W. Marriott and it was this white guy, older white guy and he just pulled out a condom and did it and I was just like I'm by myself, I can't win, this guy is way bigger than me, and what if he tries to beat me or something. And it really sucks but then again I put myself in that position and all that type of stuff but this was when I first started when it ..and that was a

boundary I didn't want to cross...And his penis was weird. It was weird looking penis. It was oddly shaped, it was wide, it was weird, and you could definitely tell he couldn't sleep with a whole bunch of people and I remember I was in pain for maybe 4 or 5 days after that, again I didn't have sex with people so that was very, very traumatic.

I tried to think of what to say in the pause she left behind but before I could come up with anything, she said, After that, that really forced me to be more assertive about what I will do and won't do with people.

I said nothing at first. Didn't know how to process what I'd just heard. She said I was the first person she'd told. I wanted to make her feel better but knew that no words could change what had happened to her, take back the night that she'd never forget. So I did what I usually do, told her my own sad story, I guess hoping she'd feel a little better knowing she wasn't alone. I told her about my assault the year before, when I was grocery shopping in Crete and got a ride back to the house from the older local man with the motorbike, how he took me down a wrong street into barren acres of grass, took the keys out of the bike, grabbed me, raised my dress, stuck his fingers inside me. When I finished telling the story, Eva kept apologizing. I'm so sorry that happened to you, she kept saying. But you were raped, I kept thinking. You were raped and you were a virgin. You didn't deserve any of this. It's not your fault. Don't blame yourself. I'm the lucky one.

Awww, Crystal, Eva said, holding up the candles I bought her. Vanilla and sandalwood, my favorite. Show off, one of her childhood friends said jokingly. They're just from CVS, I said. Eva unwrapped her last few gifts—a real-looking pleather purse, a Target gift card, a two-tone amethyst bracelet that shined violet rays when it caught the light—read each card aloud. We seemed like such normal people then, like maybe everything was fine.

EXCUSE ME FOR LIVING: AN ESSAY

The men don't know it, but they are secretly coming to church. They are seeking absolution, acceptance, compassion, kindness, and caring from a willing, friendly woman ... They believe themselves to be fundamentally unloveable because of their sexuality ... Granting these men acceptance and understanding instead of disgust and ridicule is the single most profound aspect of sex work.

—NINA HARTLEY

*I'm not fit to occupy space. Excuse me for living.*⁸

—FLORA RHETA SCHREIBER

1.

I love sex, Veronica said. I'd just asked her how she got involved in the industry. It was the beginning of February, 2015, and we—me, Eva, and Veronica—were sitting in the living room of Eva's new Inglewood apartment. I was in LA finishing up dissertation research and the three of us had scheduled an informal group interview,⁹ which had quickly turned into a Saturday night of laughing and gossiping, reminiscing about all the things we'd seen and done, all that had changed, all that had stayed the same, bonding over our massive sexual appetites, more laughing. And not just any laughter. That back of the throat, tear-inducing laughter that only shared secrets and history can engender.

I've always had a thing for sex, Veronica continued. And more than the everyday generic sex, which is what I call it.¹⁰ She laughed softly, almost cartoon-like.

Veronica was big on words that had to do with consumption: appetite, cravings, hunger, desire. I wasn't the only one who noticed. Some of her clients mentioned it in their online reviews. One said as soon as he arrived, he felt Veronica's appetite, called her ravenous for his dick. He went on to describe in detail—the details you can only see when you pay for a VIP membership—how she helped him get undressed and went straight for his penis. Before I could get my pants off, he wrote, her lips were around it. And clients enjoyed her encouragements. She told them what she liked, guided their tongues and hands, orgasms.

2.

When I first met Veronica, she was sitting in the Office lobby, hiding behind her clunky laptop, small oval glasses, and orthopedic sneakers. She was a licensed masseuse and full-time computer programmer, worked remotely from the Office between sessions. I'd learn, about a month later, that she was also an escort and BDSM mistress.¹¹ In other words, men came to her to fulfill a variety of needs and fantasies. Some men liked to cross dress to discover more about themselves, she said, or because they always liked the feel of pantyhose against their skin or to express their vulnerability, which they typically have to hide in their day-to-day lives. Sometimes it was a way to pay homage to the women in their lives whom they adore and admire. Other men came to be dominated. Men paid her to be physically and verbally humiliated, flogged, spanked, whipped, caned, slapped, treated like pets, to cross-dress and play out all sorts of sadomasochistic and fetishistic scenes. You know, Veronica said, sometimes they get tired of being in control all day.¹² I don't think they're weird. They're just what they are.

The first time I met one of her clients, I was sitting in Room 5 with Eva. I remember the sound of laughter through the walls, the kind of giggling you associate with small children—free, innocently flirtatious. Then silence. A few seconds later, Veronica peeked her head into the room. Can y'all do me a favor? she asked, smiling, her face a rectangle between the door and frame. I remember her voice was raised to an exaggeratedly high-pitched tone, the one she usually used when saying something sexual.

I turned and looked at Eva.

Sure, Eva said, half-answer, half-question.

Okay, I said.

Veronica smiled, opened the door all the way.

Veronica was about 5'9, broad shoulders, wide hips, and long legs, what my mother would call a brick house. Solid. She was still wearing her librarian glasses but the jeans and blouse and orthopedic sneakers she'd come in wearing in the morning had been replaced by a black silky dress that stopped in the middle of her thick thighs and low heels. Her wavy brown

weave was pinned up out of her cocoa butter-colored face

I want y'all to meet my client, she said, but he's a little shy. We'd seen him come in, through the crack between the door and the wall. He was an average looking white guy, 40s, a medium build veiled behind an unexceptional business suit.

Be right back, Veronica said.

I got up and stood in the doorway with Eva. You could hear Veronica trying to coach her client into confidence, like an owner teaching a puppy new tricks. Come on. You can do it. Show my two friends how good you look. Then the light patter of heels clicking down the hallway carpet.

Tom, Veronica said, putting her hand on his padded shoulder, these are my friends, Eva and Crystal. We both said hi. You could see the color rising in his pale cheeks, his face almost as red as the polka dots on his dress.

Doesn't he look nice? Veronica said. She spoke in the soothing tone of a mother trying to convince her child to smile on picture day.

Eva looked at me, then at the man in the dress. Wow, Eva said, you look great, Even if she was lying, I couldn't tell. She was always so damn cheerful. And that hair! He had on a synthetic blonde wig, reminded me of a blond Raggedy Ann.

Really? Tom said. He tugged at the bottom of his red and white polka dot dress. It was almost knee-length, flared and stopped in the middle of his stubbly thighs. He gave a shy smile that contrasted oddly against his hulking build, made him less like a football player and more a timid schoolgirl in the stands.

Yeah, I said. You are wearing that dress.

Give 'em a little twirl, Veronica said.

Tom stuck his hand out. Veronica grabbed it. I still have an image of that hand, gently reaching out, quietly hoping to be grabbed, reminded it was not as alone as it feared. Then they twirled.¹³

You could see the confidence building up in his face as it went back down to its normal baby powder color. Like watching an off-Broadway production of *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *Real*

Sex. A couple minutes later, Tom pranced back to the massage room, his path illuminating the distance between our desires and realities.

3.

I like to make clients feel comfortable, Veronica said, like an old boyfriend had done for her over thirty years ago. He always provided me with a safe space, she said, to feed my sexual cravings. Open and sexual. He gave me the safe haven to experiment with any and everything I always wanted to do.¹⁴

This was back in the 70s. Her partner at the time introduced her to the swing community, a community she said that provided her with a safe haven to experiment with any and everything she always wanted to do. They started going to swing parties, where Black women were always in high demand. She said it was as though her body had been awakened and fed, and suddenly she'd discovered she had a ravenous appetite. A few years later, she got into BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism). I was tired of the swinging lifestyle, she said. I got tired of fucking all the time and it was kind of empty. Someone suggested BDSM and there was a fetish shop near her job that offered training. She applied.

I was like I'm all that and a bag of chips, you know me, so bow down to me. That was what I was thinking, and little did I know, it was true and it was mostly white guys. They were all infatuated, you know, you're a tall, sexy, statuesque Black woman.¹⁵ Veronica said they started her as a sub but it didn't last long. She liked to be in control. Mistress Misty was born after a month.

They taught me how to manipulate men more than I already knew how to get them to do what I want them to do. It's fun, I like the role-play. Once that got old, she got her massage license around 2000 while still working full-time as a computer programmer, started working at the Office in 2010 when she moved back to LA to take care of her mother. She said coming to the Office was like her version of happy hour.¹⁶ Between clients and me and Eva, she said she was always entertained, something she didn't get much of once she head back home to her disabled husband, a war vet, and sickly, aging mother. Besides the break form reality, she still liked the job

more than the rest of us. She was the only one in the Office who'd say she truly enjoyed her work with a real smile on her face when you asked. It was different for her. She had other sources of income, said coming to the Office was for fun and extra money.

I'm not going to say I don't need the money, she said. It's nice to have that extra little bit of money, but my 9-5 is what really supports the family and everything else. It was that same little bit of money that kept the rest of us going.

Don't get to that point that you want to make this money and that kind of rules you and you don't enjoy it, Veronica warned us. She said that was what happened to her in corporate America. I was making the money but I wasn't enjoying it because I was constantly working to get it.

I'll tell y'all like I tell my kids, Veronica said. You have to be able to wake up and look at yourself in the mirror. If you can't, something's wrong. Do not do anything in life that you cannot look at yourself in the mirror about. Am I ashamed of what I do? Nope. I can look at myself in the mirror and still go on.

4.

Eva went into the kitchen to look for snacks. Somehow Veronica and I got to talking about first times. Veronica had a smile on her face as she recalled how good it felt. The staircase they sat on. The drips of blood on the floor. She said she was 10 or 11 and the he boy was her older cousin's best friend, around 15 or 16. She said it all serenely as though recalling the delicious dinner she'd just had.

Eva walked back in the living with a bowl of tortilla chips in her hand. I told y'all not to start without me, she said.

Veronica was just telling me about her first time, I said.

Sounds hot, Eva said.

How old did you say you were again? I asked Veronica, consciously making sure there was no hint of sarcasm in my voice. I kept my eyes on my laptop screen. I thought it would be better to pretend I needed her to verify my notes than to sound like I was judging her.

Oh my God, Eva said. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you were so young.

Don't be, Veronica said. I enjoyed every minute of it. She said the boy was experienced and made sure she enjoyed it. Actually, she loved it. It's not like it was rape, she added. It felt good. She had a smile on her face.

I said nothing, stopped myself from making any noticeable facial expression or telling her that she had been raped—at least as far as statutory rape laws are concerned. Who was I to take on the role of morality police.

I have a more European outlook on sexuality, Veronica said. She grew up traveling constantly with her mother, who she called a pioneer in the computer world. As an only child, they were always on the road or on a plane. By high school, she'd enrolled in over a dozen schools. We never stayed anywhere long, Veronica said, so I learned not to get comfortable. They lived mostly abroad, in Europe and Hawaii in the 60s and 70s. It's a lot more liberal, a lot more free, she said, a lot more natural, a different mindset than the way Americans think about sex. Totally night and day. It's not exactly free love but they're not uptight about it.¹⁷

Veronica paused for a moment, then said, That's what I hate about America. It's so bourgeois. Everything is in a category. Sex is taboo. The people making the most noise trying to get it outlawed are the ones in there paying for it.

5.

Veronica asked if I was still working from home. Eva and Veronica were two of the only people who knew I did in-calls from my apartment in Philly. I'd told Veronica when I started, asked her for advice since she'd worked from home before.

I've always felt for you, Veronica said, because I know you're out in New York and Philadelphia and you don't have that network, that system.

She'd tried to find people for me before, but the girls she knew were either out of the business or she couldn't find their contact information.

I at least wanted you to have someone to network with, Veronica said, that support. And that's why I liked the Office. Although I didn't make a lot of money and there was drama, there

was still that camaraderie with the girls.

And you can freely talk, Eva said.

When I was in Hawaii working, I knew girls, Veronica said. But Hawaii is so standoffish. The girls don't network together and I was trying to get them to start networking even for safety reasons but they wouldn't do it. It was seen as taboo, you don't want to let other people know what you're doing. She said more girls were getting ripped off, they weren't really screening clients unless they were elite, the middle and bottom didn't screen. They got busted a lot, robbed, picked up, raped, manhandled. They don't have the network system so that why I'm glad that you're doing this. Even though this is coming from an African American standpoint, it's still coming from a female's point of view someone actually working in the industry, to give us a voice and open up a dialogue.

6.

Veronica advertised as Hawaiian. At first I thought it was just a marketing strategy, a way to stand out from the other Black body rub girls and escorts. She did look ambiguous, like she could be a light skinned African American, bi-racial, coolie, Creole. Plus, thanks to Hawaii's oriental history and Hollywood's romanticizing of Hawaii as a calm and relaxing paradise away from the rest of the world, it tends to call to mind primitive beauty and allure. Luaus and hulas, pigs roasting over open flames, tan women in grass skirts, smiling faces playing ukuleles as they greet you at airports and hotels with tropical drinks and leis.¹⁸

Veronica said she identified as Hawaiian since that was the place she lived the longest, where she raised her kids. She said her mother was Black and German, but light enough to pass and her father was a Black man from Chicago with darker skin. I asked her if she identified as Black at all. She said she knew she was Black but didn't really identify since she'd been out of the country in the 60s and 70s, the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It wasn't bad like that where I was, she said. Plus the father of her children was white, her children basically looked white, and the majority of her family on her mother's side was white. She said she'd never told anyone this, but her grandfather was a Nazi soldier and her family owned slaves once they came to America.

I wondered if that was why she was the way she was. If her ambivalence towards race afforded her a type of freedom I'd never had. *Was it her distance from our collective past that allowed her to move forward? Had she moved forward?*

As she talked, I felt myself judging her, tried to stop myself from hearing what I wanted rather than what was actually being said. I knew there was more than one way to be Black the same way there was more than one way to be woman. Still, I couldn't help but question Veronica's racial allegiance.¹⁹ Did her ambivalence about race in America change anything?

I asked Veronica if she ever did race play with clients.^{20 21} She said she'd tried it, but can't say in character. My thing is, she said, when I am in my BDSM mode, mindset, I draw back onto experiences to bring into it to help with the role play, so since I've never experienced any racial type deals I can't always stay in character. I get it started off of stories people have told me.

She said there were just a few other things she didn't do, like mommy-kid role-play. That gets a little too weird because I have kids, she said. No, I'm not about to fuck my little kid. Sorry, no. She laughed. But things like teacher-student, employee-employer, she said, when I get go back into life experiences, that makes it fun for me.

That night was the most I'd ever heard Veronica talk about her husband and kids. Most people didn't even know she was married. I asked her why that was. She said she tried to keep her personal life to herself because she hated being judged. You know, she said, people on the outside don't understand from looking in. They just say we're totally dysfunctional, but it works for us.²²

Veronica's husband had been paralyzed on the job, which made things difficult for them, physically, emotionally, sexually. It's a lot of work, she said. Disability. He doesn't have the mobility now, so sex isn't the same, but we're a lot more creative. He gave me permission to have sex outside the marriage and stuff like that. He knows my cravings and he would never be able to keep up with them now because he just doesn't have that mobility and drive and stuff like that, and I love him for that. You know, it's like he knows he can't do this so okay, let me help you

Veronica was describing her third husband. She said she'd married three times, one for sex, once for love, and now, it was more difficult to explain since she and her husband were childhood friends, so in a way it started out of convenience. She told me and Eva about her first two husbands and the man she'd thought she would end up spending the rest of her life with. She'd married her first husband, the father of her three children, when she was 20. She didn't know that he was married at the time. Her second husband, who she married for love, left her. He loved Alex, she said, and I think Alex loved him, but he hated Misty.

She spoke about the different parts of herself—what she called her personas—in the third person as though they were distinct people. I asked her to name all of them. After a long pause, she said, There's Veronica, the therapeutic masseuse; Misty, the mistress; Lacey, the extra extra naughty masseuse. She will fuck your brains out if she's in that mood and then turn around and say, I didn't do that, I don't know what you're talking about. Lisa, the escort, she was just a hoe, a straight out hoe. Alex is me as a person, who I was born and raised as, and then Alexandra, protector of the entire body, the alpha and male.

I said nothing.

How do you compartmentalize so many parts of yourself? Eva asked.

You know, Veronica said, I don't know how I do that. It's just the different people. I have different voices--

You're so good, Eva said, finishing her thought while Veronica was in mid sentence. You have split personality.

Yeah, I do, Veronica said. I do have different voices and different people come out at certain times and to me one person doesn't know about the other person, like several of my other personalities don't know about the BDSM side. Now the massage, like Michelle and Lynn, they know about the BDSM because the BDSM person is also the protector of the body for me. My BDSM person, her real name is Georgina, which is part male and part female, which is the protector of this entire domain.

Wow, Eva said, you're a functioning person with multiple personalities but you function well in society. There's some people that have to take medication.

Yeah, I said. Have you always known this?

See, I don't think, see, I'm not a Sybil.

They laughed into each other's laugh, and I felt obliged to join them. But beneath my laughter was mostly doubt and confusion. Did she really have multiple personality disorder, or was she like me and Eva, with different names for different parts of herself?

Most of what I knew about Sybil and multiple personalities came from *The United States of Tara*, a dark comedy about Tara Gregson, a middle-aged Kansas wife and mother with multiple personalities who shifts between different alters—from a 1950s housewife, to a gun-toting, chain-smoking war vet, to a hypersexual teenage girl.²³ It's revealed in the third season that Tara was assaulted as a child by her step-brother, which led to her dissociating. *Had Veronica been abused as a child? Did having sex at such a young age cause her to dissociate? Why didn't she talk about her father?*

These thoughts ran through my mind while Veronica and Eva kept talking, I didn't say anything, nodded occasionally. Like Leslie Jamison in *The Empathy Exams*, I saw nodding as a saving vagueness. *I could agree with the emotion without promising anything else*, Jamison writes. *The nod can hold agnosticism and sympathy at once.*

I have all these different personas, Veronica said, which I kind of put all into a bubble and say these are the different aspects of me and all of them makes up who I am. And like I said, Alexandra is the protector of the entire realm because she is the knight in shining armor, she's the dragon slayer, she's the person that goes out to make the money.

7.

Veronica told us something that she'd never told anyone. She said she thought the man she fell in love with after her second husband was her soul mate. They dated for eight years. He was one of her former clients from when she was an escort. He was married, left his family to be with her, moved with her across the country. Then he left her for another woman, a woman Veronica had introduced him to. She said she did it for him, described it as a kind of sacrifice, like it was for the greater good.

I kind of put the two of them together, she said, because I couldn't be that lady up in front. I've always been that person behind the famous man and push him forward. He was in the church and I couldn't be that person out in the limelight because I have a past and that would hurt his career.

I get that, Eva said. I totally get it. You love him. It's the same as your husband saying go do that because you wanted him to be happy.

After a long pause, Veronica said, I hope this one works out, because if not, I don't know what's left. She looked down at her hands.

I felt my heart breaking when she said that, her words like one of those love songs on the radio that seems so beautiful at first, until you actually listen to the words. How, it makes you wonder, could such a beautiful song tell such a sad story?

I wondered if we could ever be truly happy, what that might look like. It seemed like we were all trapped in a way, no matter how many polka-dot dresses we put on, men we dominated, how much sex we had. There was still dominant culture, still those people to remind us that the bars still exist. Were we ever really in control, or was life like a BDSM session with its temporary moments of empowerment and agency, a negotiated version of liberty?²⁴ Veronica had done everything, and still, here she was, crossing her fingers, hoping her marriage would last, that being herself was enough. I wondered if all her failed relationships were some sort of punishment for her gluttony, her insatiable appetite society was set on regulating?

8.

After one hour turned to five, then six, Veronica looked at her watch and coyly eased the time into conversation. Wait, wait, Eva said as I lifted my head off her carpet. Veronica, tell Crystal about your client yesterday. Eva had a big grin on her face, the corners of her mouth silently saying, this is gonna be good.

Yo, Eva continued, she checked this dude the other day.

I looked over at Veronica. She'd gone from half asleep to grinning like a kid on Christmas. Oh, he was so much fun, Veronica said. He was so much fun. She couldn't stop

smiling. Go ahead, she said to Eva, you can tell it.

Okay, Eva said. She stood up in the middle of the living room. This guy comes in, he's just an alpha asshole male, like I want it this way, I want it that way, I want you to stroke my ass. He was talking to her like that, okay? Then her mistress came out, and she's like—Eva makes her voice real soft—you didn't ask permission for that.

Veronica jumped in. So he's tryna like take off my bra because I wouldn't take off my clothes. Period. Cause normally we'll do it topless or something like that. But this guy came in like Eva said, as an alpha, totally in control, used to getting his way and it's like, I ain't the one. And he started dictating and he pushed one of my buttons. I don't know what button it was, but the other person came out. And every time he said can I see your breasts, no. Well, can you do it a certain kind of way. No. Everything he asked me for the whole time, I kept on saying no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Veronica said she told the client that if he'd just come in without trying to be in control and had let somebody else take control for once, he would've gotten everything he wanted and experienced more things he'd never experienced before. The client said he wasn't used to that, that he was used to always being in control.

Then he goes, Veronica continued, I just can't figure you out. And then he had said something like I want your black skin all over me and he said it a couple times and I kinda stopped him.

So did he like want to cut it off your body? I said.

Eva and Veronica laughed.

Finally I had to say why do you keep on calling me Black or ebony. And he said is that not the word you're supposed to say. And I said I'm not either one of them, I'm Hawaiian. And he's like oh, I didn't know and it's like he just didn't know what to say so I took even more control from out of him.

Because you're BDSM, Eva said. You know how to break people down.

And, you're a Black woman, I thought.

So I finally got him the chance to relax, Veronica said. I flip him over, and he wanted me to talk dirty to him. I cannot talk dirty to somebody when I'm not feeling it at all. He wanted me to bite his ear, rubs his ears a certain kind of way.

Yo, how much he paying, I said, more statement than question. Shit, all these requests. What I was really thinking: white people, man. White privilege is real. They really just expect everything.

Right, Eva said.

That's what I was thinking too, Veronica said. It's like, wait a minute. This is only a \$50 session, I'm only getting \$5 and you're doing all this. She laughed. So, I got him turned over, got him to relax, and then I changed the script on him. Cause now he's like I'm not doing anything, I'm just gonna sit here, I'm not gonna touch you, I'm not gonna say anything, and I know he's pissed off. So I say, if you woulda just came in here in the first place and just totally relaxed ...

You think you'll see him again? I asked.

Yeah, she said, smiling. I think so. It was a kinda fun.

Before I left, I gave Eva and Veronica \$100. I told them the money was from my research funds, though it was actually the massage money I'd made the day before. I knew they'd be more willing to take money from my school than the cash I earned from a massage. They were appreciative, skipped the whole "you don't need to pay me" back and forth game that some people like to play. I appreciated them for that. No tricking for me tonight now, Veronica said laughing.

9.

I sat at my computer screen for hours, days, weeks trying to turn my notes and night with Eva and Veronica into some coherent narrative, a way to connect the dots of Veronica's life, wondering if Veronica had multiple personalities, debating what was real and what was fake. Tired of the blank page, I turned to books for inspiration.

I spent weeks researching BDSM and psychoanalysis and Hawaii and multiple personality disorder, now called dissociative identity disorder (DID).²⁵ I learned that I was not

alone in my confusion. DID remains one of the most controversial psychiatric disorders.²⁶ Some psychologists doubt its existence, going their entire careers without seeing a single case, while others encounter dozens of patients, almost of whom were abused as children.²⁷ Even the infamous Sybil case was called into question. In 2011, a journalist named Debbie Nathan published *Sybil Exposed: The Extraordinary Story Behind the Famous Multiple Personality Case*. She claims that Sybil's case was largely exaggerated and fabricated for profit, that the sixteen alters were forced on Sybil by her therapist and Sybil went along with it to please her doctor.²⁸

I learned that after the 1973 release of the novel *Sybil*, which sold nearly 6 million copies, and the 1976 made-for-TV movie, diagnoses for multiple personality disorder skyrocketed.²⁹ Between 1922 and 1972, fewer than fifty cases had been reported. By 1995, nearly 40,000 new cases had emerged, and the prototypical patient resembled Sybil: a white woman in her thirties with an average of sixteen personalities.^{30 31} Some claim that this resemblance is no coincidence, that multiple personality is a modern-day version of hysteria, a way of medicalizing the oppression of women.^{32 33} DID is often used as a metaphor for identity. Inner fragmentation and plurality of the mind as a way to meet the overwhelming demands of our post-modern society. A representation of our inner diversity in a world that wants us whole. Diablo Cody, the creator of *The United States of Tara*, Diablo Cody, explains Tara's multiple personalities as metaphors for the many roles that modern mothers are expected to fulfill. *What are the different hats a mother needs to wear in her life?* Cody says. *Sometimes she needs to be a man and have balls. Sometimes she has to be this docile caretaker. And sometimes she has to be sexual.*³⁴

I found myself wondering if DID was real or just an exaggeration of normal human behavior, a medical term for the multiple masks and roles that we each take on. Was it a term for the roles we all play in the world, each of us an actor with a whole cast inside of us taking their turn at center stage. Like the famous Shakespeare phrase goes, All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players. I wondered if Veronica's personas, like Tara's, were how she coped with life, dealt with all the roles she was expected to assume as a wife, mother, daughter, businesswoman, woman who likes to fuck. Or maybe multiple personality disorder is another way to pathologize being a Black woman in America, as we struggle with multiple

identities and desires, straddle black and white worlds, constantly try to find ways to exist, prove stereotypes wrong, survive. *Let me see*, says Lynda Frazier, an artist played by Viola Davis on United States of Tara, *I have been called borderline, bipolar, depressive, garden-variety hysterical woman, post-partum, pre-partum, partum-partum, fucked-up, Angela Davis, angry-black-woman syndrome. I heard it all, baby. I gave up on that white floor, bright lights scene. I feel much better here.*

10.

The research left me with more questions than answers. And it was the questions that reminded me that not everything can be answered. So eager to turn Veronica's complicated life into a coherent narrative, using her experiences as metaphor for other people's realities, I was failing to do exactly what Veronica had done most of her life: step outside the box, accepting things as they are, work with what you got.

I decided to interview Veronica one more time, told myself I would just listen to what she said rather than what I wanted to hear, let her tell her own story. She called me one afternoon during her hour drive from work. After telling me how her day was (not too bad, three clients), she talked about BDSM (It's about imagination and manipulation, she said. It's about the exchange of power, giving up control and taking it), the importance of safe spaces (I think everyone needs that in their world because if you don't explore those thoughts and fantasies its not going anywhere, and here you're not doing any harm to anybody. You need a venue to release whatever it is inside.), and why she enjoys her work (A lot of this, especially on our side, is not about the sex. It's about the companionship. About having somebody to sit there with or just talk to or just to have their hands on, what they don't get this at home. That's why I feel good about it.). When I asked her how she'd describe her personas to other people, she said was like one a Russian nesting dolls, one of those sets of wooden dolls, always another one when you open it up. She said her different personas presented slightly different versions of herself to the world depending on which world she was in at the time. It wasn't that the outermost persona was a lie, she said. It was just one part of herself, one part of many that came together to make the whole.

. Much better metaphor than a sad love song.

IV. NAVIGATING AND NARRATING STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL: MANAGING EROTIC LABOR THROUGH FEMALE FRIENDSHIP, SPIRITUALITY, STORYTELLING, AND HUMOR

Navigating And Narrating Strategies of Survival: Managing Erotic Labor Through Female Friendship, Spirituality, Storytelling, and Humor, further examines the challenges and risks of racialized erotic labor (policing, devaluation, how criminal, social, and health policies continuously seek to regulate and control the selling of sex and the sexualities of women of color), and the coping mechanisms and strategies of survival used by the masseuses at home and in the workplace (storytelling, humor, religion, etc.) in order to protect their physical, erotic, and emotional wellbeing in an industry, and larger society, in which they are devalued.

THE THING ABOUT LUCK: AN ESSAY

*Now help me light three sticks of incense. The smoke will take our wishes to heaven. Of course, it's only superstition, just for fun. But see how fast the smoke rises—oh, even faster when we laugh, lifting our hopes, higher and higher.*¹

—AMY TAN

She lit an incense stick every day before her first session. You couldn't just put a flame to it though, she said. You had to talk too in order to bring the good luck and good clients. And you had to mean it. The incense came in a long green and black package that said GOOD LUCK AND PROTECTION on the front. That was the sort of person she was. A believer. She'd light the flammable stick near the front door, put her need—and ours— for fortune and security into the universe, walk to her massage room with the tip of glowing ember held high, the woody smell of safety trailing behind, drifting to the paneled ceiling like an offering, walk around her massage table, place it in a holder.

Alice was a Catholic and a bruha. She practiced sacraments and premarital sex, lit candles and incense, recited the words of Christ and cursed anyone who wronged her. She learned Kulam, Filipino folk magic, when she was a teenager back in the Philippines, mostly spells and Voodoo dolls. She came to America when she was 19 with a few hundred dollars and a finance degree, back in the '80s during the fourth wave of Filipino immigration that's helped make Filipinos the biggest Asian group in California. She spent the first half of her time in LA working for a bank. She said it was different then. She'd been in America for less than three days, went up and down the street handing out her resume like she was passing out restaurant flyers, had a job the next day. Then she started her own travel business and was making six figures a year, had a nice house in the suburbs. Then 9/11 happened. She's been working with Rhonda for six years.

Alice was the shape of a bullet: short and compact. She had olive colored skin and wispy jet-black hair that moved with her neck when she talked. She was the oldest masseuse in the Office, mid-50s like Veronica. You could tell her age by her rituals and precision. She marked

down each session in her worn notebook: name, number, date, length of session, amount paid, if and how much the person tipped. She was a good business woman in all the ways that mattered but one. She was too nice, too trusting. In ways the rest of us weren't. She'd been ripped off more than any other girl in the Office. One guy handed her an envelope at the beginning of the session and she didn't look inside until he left. It was empty. She tried to run after him but he was already gone. There was the guy, a regular, who said he left the money in his car. He never came back. And the dude who left a stack of money on the table, what Alice thought was all twenties. Ended up being a twenty on the top and all singles underneath. Now she asked for money upfront and counted it in front of you. Plus she cursed anyone who wronged her.

Alice walked out of the massage room wiping beads of sweat—I couldn't tell if they were real or metaphorical—from her forehead. She looked at me and the new girl Tiffani.

Why do black me take so long? Alice asked in a serious tone like she was expecting some textbook answer that had been proven with multiple trials and variables and constants. Shit, my hands hurt, she said in her Filipina accent that had morphed with the hundreds of strands of American, Mexican, and every other dialect imaginable over three decades in Los Angeles. She made her small olive hands into fists with spaces left in the center like odd-shaped doughnuts and moved them up and down really fast, jerking off the air.

They know how to hold that shit in, Tiffani said. They make sure they get their money's worth.

Alice paused, breathing heavier than usual. Normally for hour session, I do 40 minutes back, she said, 20 minutes front. For them, I have to leave 30 minutes. She opened up her hands and shook them real hard like the gesture would shake the tension and exhaustion. Damn, she said, my hands hurt. First he asked for hour, then paid me for 30 more minutes.

She looked like she was about to pass out. If only catching her would help.

I dropped Alice off at her apartment that night, a little over a mile from the Office. Her son had the car. She invited me inside for dinner. Once you got off the elevator at the sixth floor of her building, you instantly knew which apartment was hers. In the center of the hallway stood a door with laminated photographs of Mary and an old palm fronds like the ones you get from church on Palm Sunday pinned beside it. More biblical references waited inside: rosaries, a Mary statue, blessed candles scattered amongst houseplants and pictures of her son and step-daughter crowded on tables. It was like a Catholic paraphernalia shop.

I picked up a picture of her son. He was about ten years younger, his face still plump with baby fat. That was before the divorce, when he was still living with both his parents in a 3-bedroom house in the suburbs, a year before his mother would have to scrounge up money to get them a 2-piece meal from KFC to split for Christmas dinner. Alice cried when she told me that story.

We sat at the dining room table, a couple feet from the living room sofa, which converted into her 19-year-old son's bed. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment with her son, mother, and her aunt, her mother's younger sister. We talked low so we could listen for her mother who was in bed in the backroom. If she woke up and no one was there she might try to get out of bed alone. Between the Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, she always ended up on the floor. None of them could afford another broken hip.

She grabbed her old wedding album to show me pictures of her ex husband. I leaned forward, ashy elbows on her worn ash colored wood table, stared at Alice in her wedding dress. Like a photo from an old magazine. Alice was about forty pounds smaller—she said she was 91 pounds when she arrived in America—her face youthful, soft.

After Alice closed the album, she pulled a pamphlet from a pile of papers and mail on the side of the table, placed her hand on it as if it were a bible and she were about to take an oath. She handed it to me. There was a tombstone on the cover. Forest Lawn Memorial Park. A private cemetery in Glendale with the same name as a cemetery back in the Philippines.

7,000 just for the hole in the ground to put her body in, she said. Another 10,000 for a basic package. 17,000 just to give my mother a decent funeral, just two days viewing. You know,

we're Filipina. We don't believe in cremation. And she is my mother. She deserves something nice.²

I watched her hold in the tears. The basic. Coffin, flowers, burial. 17,000. I don't believe it. Her mother didn't have any life and burial insurance so she had to pay for everything out of pocket. She was already behind in rent and had just set up a payment plan with her landlord.

My mother can tell, Alice said, playing with a napkin. Her hands were always fussing with something—her hair, a piece of fruit, paper.

She sees that I'm struggling and it's never been like this before. She knows something is wrong. She told me she doesn't want to leave me until she sees that I am okay, that we're okay. I tell her I'm fine but she doesn't believe me. She knows.

She put a couple hundred away for the funeral each month. You know, she said, once the person dies you have to pay the rest up front or you can't have the funeral.

What? I couldn't believe it.

Yes, so now I'm hoping she's okay, you know for a while, but then I also have the caregiver and I have to pay her. A neighbor had recommended the caregiver. A friendly woman from Guatemala. She cooked, cleaned, did laundry, gave Alice's mother her meds and kept her company for \$10 an hour. Alice said since the woman started coming three weeks ago she already noticed the changes. Her mother was happier. But now she needed more clients to pay the woman and still have money left over.

\$90 a day, she said. 9 hours a day, times that by 5. That's \$450 a week. \$1800 a month for caregiver. That's just big money I did not expect. I feel so tired. I feel like I'm just working for the bills and the caregiver. I'm just thinking about saving this money for when the day comes.

Her son walked in the living room to ask if she'd seen where he left the car keys. In the kitchen, she said. I was convinced all mothers had some superpower that allowed them to remember where all missing items were. He gave her a kiss on the cheek before he left for work.

And now he's working extra hours, she said, taking less classes. He pays for everything. He says, mom, don't think about me no more. I'm good. I just pray that everything will work out.

Every twenty minutes or so her aunt would come in the living room and sit on the sofa, watch one of her game shows for ten minutes, and go back in the room.

Alice's aunt said she wanted to be buried in the Philippines. Take me home, she'd said. I don't want to be buried in America. I asked Alice if she wanted to go back. She said it wasn't an option. The Philippines wasn't safe for her son anymore.

If this was safer than here, I thought, it must be pretty dangerous. After all, she was raising her son in a country where police kill two people of color a week. Despite her current circumstance, Alice said America offered her and her family more than the Philippines could. Over 70% of the Philippine population lived below the poverty line, two in every five poor Filipino families living in homes without electricity, many without access to safe water or sanitary toilets. Too much corruption and too poor. America was home.

You know, Alice said, it's worth it when I see that my mother is happy. She gets her dressed and sends me pictures of her.

Alice kept talking but my mind wandered to my grandmother. How I'd dress her up even though we had nowhere to go and probably wouldn't have gone even if we did. I thought about how beautiful she felt despite it all, despite the cancer spreading from her lungs to the rest of her body, about the difference a fresh outfit, a greased scalp, and some nail polish made. I thought about the last time I did her nails when she was alive, nine months before that evening with Alice. We were in the living room of her house in South Carolina, she was sitting in her big comfy floral print chair that reminded me of Steve's thinking chair from Blues Clues and I was hunched over on the floor, shaving down her thick ass toenails while the other foot soaked in her pink plastic basin. I'd add hot water from the stove whenever she said her feet were getting cold. Now, this, I said to Grandma and my aunt and cousin who were in the kitchen, this right here, is true love. I barely touch my own feet. They laughed. Grandma said the last time my cousin gave her a pedicure they had to use a wire cutter because her big toenail was so thick. You could always tell how hard a person's life had been from their feet. After I finished the second coat of polish, like always, she did an inspection to make sure I covered every part of every nail. I always missed the

sides of at least one nail. I remember her looking at her hands and feet, she just kept staring at them and smiling. I felt more beautiful just looking at her.

Right then I wanted to put my arm around Alice, tell her everything would be fine. But I knew it wouldn't. No matter what I said or what incense we burned her mother would still be dying, she'd still be struggling to pay for her mother to die comfortably, and her mother would still be fighting death knowing that her only daughter was struggling to make ends meet.

She said there were people doing worse so she couldn't complain. I nodded to let her know I understood the sentiment but what I really meant was there would always be someone who had it worse but that doesn't change the fact that you have what you have. Doesn't make your hurt less significant.

I cried the whole ride back to my apartment. Maybe it was the music, maybe it was Alice, maybe I'd let go of my grief for too many minutes and it had hit me harder when I bumped into it again over that dining room table, or maybe it was knowing there was nothing I could do.

The next day at the Office Alice handed me a plastic container of fresh fruit she'd cut up. She was always bringing something for us from home. We sat eating pineapples and pretending like everything was fine. Sometimes that was what you needed. Pretend. One of her regulars called. He wanted to come right away. I watched her as she stood in the mirror, combing through her silky Herbal Essence-commercial hair, dab some dark lipstick on her thin lips, and pull down her elastic top to cover her gut. I needed to get up too but I kept putting the moment off. The thought of fixing my hair and makeup and entertaining some guy for an hour, the thought of Alice entertaining some guy for an hour kept me sitting, watching her.

Do you like the job? I asked. When I first started, when she had clients coming in and out and a filled notebook, I thought she enjoyed it. I realized I'd never asked.

I'm feeling good when my client says they feel good after my session. Then I feel good about what I do. But not the other stuff.

Yeah, I know what you mean.

She picked up her coffee mug and put it to her mouth. It was like just the smell of the hazelnut wiped away some of the fatigue on her face.

Five minutes before my client arrived, I took one of the incense sticks Alice had given me, lit it, and walked around the room in a faith I couldn't name, looking at the flame, asking for protection. Please protect me and the other women in this Office and bring us good clients. Alice the most.

I finished my session before Alice. She gave her clients their full hour. I tried to make them forget it hadn't been a whole hour. A benefit of youth. I sat back in the reclining chair behind the room divider in the lobby. Alice walked her client to the door, then walked over to me with that I-have-to-tell-this-to-someone-right-now look on her face. I prepared myself to laugh or act shocked even if it wasn't funny or shocking.

So, she said, chucking, he asked me to take off my shirt, you know, while I was doing the hand job. It's already been an hour so I'm like damn, I just want him out of here. Laughter entwined with her words. She had to stop for a second before she could continue. So you know what I said?

What? I asked, both wanting more and wanting her to feel the satisfaction of getting it out.

I'm sorry, that's against my religion.

SNAKES ARE MOTHERS, TOO: AN ESSAY

*Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own
That's got his own
He just worry 'bout nothin'
Cause he's got his own
Yes he's got his own...³*

—BILLIE HOLIDAY

*She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched;
grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of
lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot. She
turned the moon into salve, the stars into swaddling cloth, and
healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down
on four.⁴*

—GLORIA NAYLOR

The first thing I noticed was her socks. She was standing against the filing cabinet in the lobby with a long black cardigan wrapped around her petite frame, the fabric stopping a few inches below her knees, leaving visible high-yellow legs and thick black ankle socks scrunched at the ankles.

Tiffani, Alice said, putting her hand on my shoulder like an old friend, the same way she'd done the day we met four years earlier when she introduced me to Eva, this is Crystal, the girl I was telling you about. The one with all the different names. Alice looked at me giggling. One day she's Diamond, then she's Candy.

Wow, I forgot about Candy, I said. We both laughed. I looked at Tiffani. She didn't look amused, didn't even attempt to fake it. I didn't like her already.

It was the end of January 2015, and I'd come to the new Office to visit Alice. She made me promise to wait around until she finished her hour session so we could catch up. I sat on the old black futon I'd been waiting around on since 2011, watched Alice as she combed her hair in the mirror. Tiffani sat on the reclining chair covered in a dingy beige fitted sheet, ate her arroz con pollo out of a Styrofoam tray from the building cafeteria. Even with the sheet over it, I could spot that La-Z-Boy anywhere, it was the one from Alice's old massage room that I used to sit in when it

was just the two of us in the Office, watching her set up for a session, sometimes napping in it when we had no clients. Tiffani ate

A knock at the door. Alice hit the light switch, leaving just one of the bulbs lit. Never changed. Tiffani closed her tray, Alice pulled up her leggings over her gut, opened the door.

Hi, nice to see you, she said. She still sounded the same. I watched as they walked by, their two bodies passing between the small gaps in the oriental room dividers separating me and Tiffani from the other half of the lobby.

The new Office was the same and different. It was smaller—only three massage rooms now and no storage room for the girls to convert to a lounge—but there were traces of its former self all around: in the recycled decorations, setup, smell. Rhonda split the medium-size square-shaped lobby in half with three freestanding room dividers adorned with black squiggly lines, dwarf Japanese trees, and azaleas. Half the lobby was bare. A lamp, microwave to heat up towels and leftovers on top of a mini fridge with two water bottles and cans of juice, two mirrors on the wall. Other half, where I sat with Tiffani, a metal filing cabinet holding piles of folded sheets and towels and wash clothes and lotions and oils, Rhonda's lock box with the slit just wide enough to fit an envelope still in the corner of the top shelf. A plastic edged dorm room mirror hanging between the old futon and Lazy-Boy with a vacuum tucked next to it. Still no windows. No sink, no shower. The communal floor bathrooms were next door.

I sat on the futon and pulled out the book in my bag, *Brothers and Keepers*. It was an old memoir by John Edgar Wideman, a Black Ivy League professor and one of my writing idols, on his life and his younger brother's, who was doing a life sentence in Pennsylvania for murder. Their lives had gone down such completely different paths. Wideman wrote to understand why.

Tiffani sat in the corner on the oversized reclining chair covered by an old bed sheet—the same one from Alice's old massage room that I used to sit in when it was just me and Alice in the Office, watching her set up for a session, sometimes napping in it when we had no clients. Tiffani ate arroz con pollo out of a Styrofoam tray from the cafeteria on the ground floor. After a few minutes, she closed the box, stood up, and looked in my direction. Her light brown eyes gave me the once-over.

You working while you here? she asked. I couldn't tell if she wanted me there or was just sizing up the competition.

Nah, I said, conscious of being nonchalant. Just came to see Alice and finish up some schoolwork so I can graduate. Schoolwork. The word I used instead of dissertation. I thought it sounded too elitist, too evident of the person I was scared of becoming.

You can work right here, she said, gesturing to the futon, and make money at the same time.

She was right.

It was what I 'd been doing for the past three years, seeing clients at my apartment between classes and working at the Office when I came to LA to do fieldwork. I didn't know how to respond. I wondered what was wrong with me, when I'd stopped thinking about trying to make a quick buck. Was my grad school stipend and dissertation fellowship turning me bougie, or had I finally earned my break, my get out of jail free card, collect \$200?

First I need to get my hair done, I said. I stuck my hand in my head of long black two-strand twists that I'd done about three weeks before. My attempt at poetic justice braids. You know clients like that straight shit.

Girll, Tiffani said like we were longtime friends. She walked over to the file cabinet to fill out a time sheet for her client coming in ten minutes. Be on some back to Africa shit.

We both laughed. Again, she had a point.

I'm telling you, this one girl did it in order to make herself different from the rest she went and did her hair in the poetic justice braids and wrapped it in an African thing. She's a dancer but she set herself off from the other girls. Be doing yoga poses and shit.

I couldn't stop laughing.

Just make the headline like Black goddess or something.

That's a good idea, I said. I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, home of one of the world's top business schools, and still, women from the industry were some of the best marketers I knew.

Watch, Tiffani said, you gonna have all the slave masters calling you.

They're not getting no slave experience though.

They getting a body rub. That's it. They can have all the fantasies they want in their heads.

I don't know if it was the seriousness in her tone or because there was so much truth in her statement, but we both busted out laughing.

I was back at the Office Monday morning with my twists out and a long straight wig on. Tiffani had a good marketing pitch, but I knew what worked best for me. I got more compliments with straight hair and I felt more attractive. Some men would go for the back to Africa look but I preferred mass appeal rather than a niche market. Being black was enough of a niche.

I like your hair better this way, Alice said.

I know. I looked like the old Crystal plus about fifteen pounds.

Tiffani invited me to lunch. I drove my rental car to Boston Market while she gutted a grape cigarillo and rolled up in the passenger seat. Lunch quickly became a ritual along with blunts. We sat at a booth in the corner near the oversized glass window looking onto the street. I worked on my veggie platter—mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, and green beans—while Tiffani dissected the whole roasted chicken in front of her and just started talking about what seemed like everything that had been clouding her mind: about her kids, marrying a client, the bullet in her back from getting shot by a stray bullet in a parking lot (I always get into something when it has to do with my daughter, she says), the year and a half she spent in jail after shooting a guy in self defense after he tried to attack her. It was as if she had been waiting for an ear to talk to and couldn't help but say as much as she could before it disappeared.

Tiffani got five clients that day. I got two. I preferred quality over quantity, charged a little more and got fewer clients but usually better ones. Tiffani preferred whatever made the most money. She had that New Yorker hustler mentality. She grew up in the LES projects. Lower East Side of Manhattan during the '70s and '80s, when the trendy bars and coffee shops were storefront churches and bodegas.

If Tiffani wasn't sitting on a lobby chair eating the daily lunch special from the building cafeteria or reading one of her books (they always had half-naked Black people on the covers and titles like, Black, Beautiful, and Rich) she was taking pictures of herself with her camera phone. Whenever I'd hear a click (she had no shame, never put it on silent), I'd look over in her direction. Her long arm would be in the air with her android titled in her hand at some much-practiced angle and she'd been looking right at it, smiling. I'm really not that cocky, she'd say after it snapped. I just love pictures. I'm a photographer.

She said she took professional photos, one of her many talents. She'd gone to art school downtown about five years ago. Was where she met her on again off again. At first I questioned if she really did all the things she said--photography, filmmaking, cooking, singing. Then she showed me some of her work that she'd put online. Beautiful, well-shot videos of her daughter's dancing classes, a day at the beach with her family. I guess she was used to people not believing her. She just clicked a link on her phone and handed it to me with a smile. I never asked. And I never doubted her again.

One day she had clients back to back. After one left, she sat with her knees tucked to her chest next to Alice on the futon, put a rolled up stack of twenties in her sock. Her ritual.

You and those socks, woman, Alice said. She turned to me. I looked up from my laptop. Maybe we should start wearing socks, she said.

For real, I said. Straight G shit. It reminded me of something out of a movie.

You know, Tiffani said, grabbing at her long, narrow feet and smiling, I get that from my aunt. She would always tell her man she had no money when he came in the door. And he always came home with a lot of money. He was a street hustler, one of the dudes who did the 3 cups—she moved her hands real fast like the men do—3-card monte. Soon as he'd walk in she'd tell him to lift up his pants and say, let me check your socks. Tiffani stood up and pretended to lift up her tight ass leggings. Then she'd tell him to pull down his underwear and say, let me check your underwear. I was pretty sure Tiffani didn't have any on to demonstrate. Alice was all smiles.

She would strip that nigga damn near naked, Tiffani said laughing. You would think the nigga would start leaving the money with a friend. But no. Same thing every time. She paused. But you know, they were the first example of love I ever saw. She shot dope but I never knew. I was a kid. Twelve, eleven. I always thought she was taking a nap. She was a dopefiend. But this man, he loved her. He would clean her underwear, her house, cook for her, clean her. To this day, he still thinks she's playing a game, like she's hiding. Whenever he sees me, he holds out his pockets and says, where's your aunt? I got some money for her.

Tiffani's smile was even bigger now. He really loved her. She took really good care of him. That was the only home he knew. She looked down at her phone, then continued. She was a funny lady. Always laughing and smiling. But don't make her mad. You never knew when she might pull out a gun.

She said her aunt's face used to be plastered all over the walls of the mall near her house. She would go and steal everything, she said. I'll be on the bus playing, got 20 Barbie dolls, a cottage, all these toy houses, don't know any of this shit is stolen.

She killed herself, Tiffani said. Supposedly she had AIDS and didn't want to live like that. Shot herself in the mouth. I came in the house after and saw her brains all over the place. My cousin tried to save her. Gave her mouth to mouth. They had to put him in a mental institution after that. He hasn't been right ever since because he tried to save her and it didn't work.

Lunch breaks, blunts, and stories from Tiffani's past became a daily ritual. I had a really fucked up teenage life, she told me a few days after the sock story. We were sitting in the lobby, talking about vacations and passports. I wanted to marry early and have a normal life, so I escaped to my own fairytale. Everything I've said I wanted to do in life, I've done. Had the three acres, the five-bedroom house, trips overseas.

I asked about her ex-husband. I married one of my tricks, girl, she said. She was 22, a single mother with two kids working for an escort company in New York when she met him, a wealthy older white man over twice her age. She found what she'd been looking for, not just survival but advancement. They got married shortly after, he even adopted her two daughters. I

had it all, she said. But he was too controlling. He wanted a Barbie. These men think they're Ken with their nice cars and nice jobs and nice boats and want a Barbie to go along with it. He couldn't take it that I had a mind. He didn't want to invest in me and he was always getting jealous. She divorced him after fifteen years.

She sounded like the nameless narrator from *The Yellow Wallpaper* who grows fatigued and depressed with life and marriage after giving birth.. Her husband, who is a doctor, takes her to a summerhouse, prescribes her with the rest cure—the popular remedy of the time for women with postpartum depression—leaves her in a room with a barred window, scratches on the floor, and yellow wallpaper where she is forbidden from working or writing (doctors claim mental stimulation will just make her worse). She writes in a secret journal to *relieve her mind*, becomes fixated on the yellow wallpaper, imagines designs in it, believes she sees a woman stooping in front of bars. By the end, she is convinced there are several creeping women around, that she herself came out of the wallpaper, that she herself is the trapped woman. She creeps around the room on all fours, smudging the wallpaper as she goes. When her husband breaks into the locked room and see what's going on, he faints in the doorway, leaving the narrator to have to *creep over him every time*

I asked Tiffani if she loved her husband. She said she knew he was the one when he said this one thing to her. I was standing on this balcony overlooking the water and the hills, she said, and he goes, this, this is where you belong. You were meant to be at a place like this. He was the first person to say something like that to me, to see any value in me.

Once Tiffani's daughters were in high school, she got a divorce and moved to LA. She did amateur porn, went to art school, worked the streets as a prostitute and pimp before ending up at the Office. She sounded like a woman from a Blaxploitation film when she talked about the girls she had on the track. I only had to get violent once, she said. I didn't want to but the bitch wouldn't listen.

She said Rhonda wasn't cut out for the game, she didn't know the rules, how to pick the right girls. Anyone who'd been around for a while could see that Rhonda had gotten sloppy. As competition grew with the plummeting economy and more and more girls turning to the Internet to

sell erotic services, Rhonda got more and more lax with her rules and hiring practices. The last two Black girls she'd hired after Tiffani were off the street. When I started, the girls, could pass for middle-class even if we weren't and saw the job as a means to an end, not just an end.

I wondered how it must've felt to go from that to this. Tiffani said she wouldn't go back if she could, described her marriage like a 15-year jail bid. He didn't want me doing anything, she said on more than one occasion, thought I would just stay in the house all day. He'd come home and I'd be making something and he'd look at me like whoa, you did that, like I didn't have a brain. She said it was something she should've been used to unfortunately, that no one had ever respected her intelligence. She was always smart, got straight As throughout high school, scholarships to college. But she said that was all ruined after her mother's boyfriend assaulted her and her mother chose her boyfriend over her. After that, she moved out, was on the streets for a while, then ended up in a shelter, lost all her scholarships to college. Not like it mattered anyway, she said. Like anybody ever gave a damn about my brain.

After all that had happened, Tiffani still talked to her mom on the phone almost every day, sent her money whenever she asked, continued to love her in ways her own mother didn't seem capable of. She said their communicating was random, at any moment they could go two years without speaking. She didn't consider her mother someone she could rely on, said she learned at a young age she could only really rely on herself. She was always talking about how she didn't have any friends. Well what am I, I wondered whenever she said that. She eventually said I didn't count.

One night at dinner she said I was the only person she knew who never asked her anything, who she would just be around without there being any expectations. A part of me was grateful, the other part felt guilty for telling her story. How I rationalized it, I'd still want her in my life without or without a dissertation to write. Even when you didn't have things you were supposed to have people, I thought to myself, family, love. how could you survive without it? I wondered if that was why she had children, why she had sex. someone once asked me why poor people are always having so many kids. I thought about all my cousins living on public assistance with more mouths than they could afford to feed though they always found a way. I used to think

the same thing. then I got older and wiser, lonelier. a child was a reason to wake up on the morning, something to live for, something beautiful you could call your own in a terrible and beautiful world in which you barely owned yourself.

I told Tiffani I couldn't believe some of the shit her mother had done, most recently telling her family a bunch of lies about her for no other reason than boredom. Tiffani's response: Snakes are mothers too.

That phrase stayed with me. If Tiffani's mother was a snake, didn't that make her a snake too, or at least half of one? My mind took me to Google, to random facts about snakes, which I read are known for being two-sided, serpents symbolizing both evil and chaos, fertility and healing, disease and cure. There were several links to books and articles on snakes and motherhood, snakes infamous for laying eggs and leaving their children behind.

Then the biblical connotations, snakes and serpents mentioned over 80 times in the Bible, at times symbolizing the enemy, other times wisdom, or shiftiness. The first reference appears in *Genesis 3*, where Adam and Eve are tempted by a serpent in the Garden of Eden and ultimately fall victim to sin, marking the fall of mankind and *the serpent as the emblem of the spirit of evil... so the wicked and enemies in general are often likened to venomous serpents in the Psalms*.

I learned that two bible verses are often used to support snake handling, a religious ritual in a small number of American Pentecostal churches in the U.S. that began in the early 20th century in the Appalachia:

And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

—MARK 16:17-18

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

—LUKE 10:19

These are said to be two of the most misinterpreted and misunderstood passages in the Bible, though I find myself questioning who gets to decide what the correct interpretations are. While there is no exact record, since 1922 at least 71 people are said to have been killed by venomous snakebites during religious services in the U.S.⁵

On the deadly misinterpreting, Darrell Bock, an American evangelical Christian New Testament scholar and research professor of New Testament studies, writes, *the disciples have the right to overcome hostile creation as represented by serpents and scorpions, as well as overcome the enemy's power, an allusion to Satan...The point is not so much that such beings can be handled safely, as much as that such forces and what they represent can be opposed and crushed. The disciples are secure in God's hands. Nothing can really hurt them.*⁶

Every couple weeks, when our phones barely rang, Tiffani would check the news—and then the streets since mainstream media didn't cover most of our stories—for updates on prostitute murders. She called LA serial killer county, a coastal comfort zone for the assault, mutilation, and dumping of women's bodies, from the woody hills to the valley alleyways.⁷ Tiffani told me stories of being kidnapped while working the track, getting harassed by police, fearing for her life, reading up on serial killers while in jail. At least five serial killers--and those are just the ones that were caught—prowled South Los Angeles in the '80s and '90s, raping, torturing, and killing mostly young Black women, dumping their bodies in parks, alleys, vacant buildings, and roadsides. Between 1984 and 2007, authorities found the bodies of 55 victims, some only blocks away from the Office.

The most recent news was an update on Lonnie Franklin, Jr., who'd been dubbed the Grim Sleeper, a 57-year-old sanitation worker charged with the murders of ten women in South

Central between 1985 and 2007, and suspected of over 100 killings. According to Franklin's defense team, a DNA expert had recently determined that two of the women Franklin was accused of murdering were actually the victims of fellow South Los Angeles serial killer, Chester DeWayne Turner, who was sentenced to death in 2007 for the murder of ten women between 1987 and 1998 and was suspected in at least nine others. Turner raped, strangled, and dumped most of his victims along the Figueroa Corridor: an infamous stretch of seedy hourly motels and apartments and Black women selling sex. It was like he just threw away trash, said LaVerne Brison, sister to one of Turner's victims. And he didn't care.

The week of tears. February 26, 2015, I found out my aunt, my grandmother's sister, had passed away. I sat on the massage table in Room 1 crying and talking to my sister on the phone, thinking about my grandmother who'd died the year before, and my aunt's flesh burning over a fire like a piece of wood. Alice walked in in the middle of the call and my thoughts. She didn't say anything, just handed me some tissue and sat the box next to me. It was enough.

It was Tiffani's turn a few days later, the night I headed to South Carolina for my aunt's bodiless funeral. Tiffani didn't come in to the Office all day. When I texted her that I was leaving for a week she said she'd stop by to see me off.

I met her in the parking lot, opened the passenger seat door to Tiffani leaning against her window crying, wiping makeup and salt water onto fast food napkins.

She said she'd just been driving around and crying. Not sure what to do, I rolled a blunt while she talked.

I can't take it, she said, wiping her wet eyes, leaving black makeup on the tissue. I didn't know she cried.

This job is mentally draining, she said. It's physically draining. And I can't deal with this negativity when I come home.

She said her daughters hadn't forgiven her for going to jail, continued taking it out on her every chance they got no matter what she did. Paying the rent for both of their apartments and their phone bills and taking them shopping wasn't enough. They were driving her mad, being

disrespectful, yelling and cursing at her, threatening to call the police if she did something that made them mad since they knew she'd get arrested.

But I know that's just the Devil speaking through my daughters, she said. God's going to keep working in my favor. I can't sweat the small stuff. I been up and down.

I told her that she should consider some time away from her kids so she could focus on herself.

I know that's what I'm gonna have to do, she said, but like as a mother you don't want to abandon your kids. They are you life. I had one dude tell me he couldn't be with me because my kids ran my life.

I'm just glad God be favoring me, she continued, working in my favor. He know what direction I'm going in, that I'm trying to do good by my kids, you understand what I'm saying, when you take care of your kids, god blesses you but like you said, you can't let them kill you and I'm telling them, I'm literally telling them, do you see what's going on. I don't have no man, no friends, nobody but y'all and I'm still stressed, like I'm telling them that. Oh then don't do this, don't do that. But It's not that I don't want to.

Tears kept flowing as she smoked the wet blunt, soggy from her saliva and tears. Her face was drained of everything, her eyes were puffy and lost. She just started out the window into the parking lot, the darkness with hints of florescent lights.

In my mind I know it's time for me to gather my shit and go. You don't even understand, she kept saying.

She was right. I thought about my mother, all that shit we'd put her through over the years and continued to put her through, new scars heaping on top of old. I thought about the night I'd found her crying in her bedroom a few months earlier after my sister had made some snide remark. we didn't think about her being a person, a living breathing human being with skin capable of tearing and bleeding, a heart capable of hurting, eyes capable of crying before we spoke. we thought about ourselves not realizing we were her. It was in Tiffani's tears and words that I began to understand the destruction we were capable of causing, the additional weight we brought upon their shoulders already carrying the world.

We went upstairs so Tiffani could say hi to Alice and get a cup of the \$5 bottle of Moscato I had stashed in my bag. The tears start forming in the corners of her eyes as soon as she looked at Alice. Alice hugged her and told her to stop crying in a tone only mothers are capable of.

Tiffani sat on the floor, leaned against the futon, where Alice was sitting beside her. I kicked back in the recliner with my Moscato. Tiffani filled Alice in on the drama with her kids and bills.

You need to think about yourself for once, Alice said. I know it's hard as a mother but for once you got to put yourself first. You won't be good to anyone if you're like this. Alice pretty much said everything I'd said in Tiffani's car but it made so much more sense coming out of her mouth.

I thought I was through with this, Tiffani said. I do all this to give my kids something better and this is how they treat me? You see those 15-year-old girls walking around the projects with stroller? That was me. That was me. And I got out. Now I'm doing this to clean shit up again. You think I want to be playing with balls all day? I'm doing this to fix shit up.

Alice offered to help her look for a room to rent somewhere near the Office so she could have some alone time. We all left the Office together, hugged in the parking lot. Alice's son had the car so I drove her home on the way to the car rental place to return my car until I got back. We sat in silence for a few minutes, then Alice said that Tiffani was tough, that she admired how strong she was. I didn't know whether or not Alice realized she was practically looking in a mirror, just a little darker, distorted.

You can call me while you're gone, Alice said when I pulled up in front of her complex.

I know, woman, I said.

I'm going to miss you, you know, she said, opening the passenger seat door.

Gonna miss you too, I said smiling at the thought of being missed.

I got to the airport early so I could stream the season finale of *How to Get Away With Murder* on my iPad. I checked my phone during a commercial break. A text from Tiffani: "thank u again. appreciate everything....travel safe"

By March we—me and Tiffani-- were carpooling to work. I'd been back from South Carolina for a few days when the temperature went back to the eighties and we were driving down the freeway, the sun beaming through the windshield, a slight breeze flowing in our half-open windows, blowing our fake hair into our faces. Felt like we were on the way to a cookout. Tiffani kept moving around in her seat to adjust her back. She said she had permanent back pain from getting shot. I would have never known if I didn't see her squirming in her seat. She was always walking with her back straight, head held high, most likely with a smile on her face.

Girl, she said, I don't even know how I get out of bed half the time. She paused, then added, I just want to work and get my money up so I can go and get my own place.

I wanted nothing more than to order two tickets to some far away island where we'd drink piña coladas on a beach beneath the Caribbean sun, where Tiffani could take those thinning black ankle socks off her aching feet, let them soak in water so clear you could see your reflection, where the cell phone reception was so bad we'd be forced to leave our phones in the hotel room while we danced the night away with two cabanas boys who wanted nothing more from us than a smile and maybe a dollar tip.

Tiffani rolled her window as low as it would go. Noises of the city wafted through the open space of her car. She stuck her long sunless arm out into the warm breeze permeating the air, making a Caribbean vacation out of the California freeway.

Then our song came on--Truffle Butter—and like that we turned the car into a nightclub, hands of the wheels and dashboard like we were in a sweaty basement popping against a wall.

Hard times require furious dancing. Each of us is proof.

--ALICE WALKER⁸

Before going to the Office, she made a detour at the rib spot in Inglewood, the one with no inside, just a window to order your food and tables in the back. When it was crowded it reminded me of a family reunion minus the drunk relatives, arguments, and Electric Slide. She

got a rib special. I went across the street to get a smoothie. Only one of us could afford the calories.

On our way back to the Office Tiffani's phone rang. Him. The love of her life that she kept leaving only to return to like a human Frisbee, well, a normal human being captivated by the idea of being in love, of being loved.. She said he held her down while she was locked up, looked after her kids, visited, wrote letters. Black love, I thought, how beautiful, how dysfunctional. She said the problem was that he was younger and always had some sort of drama—always involving money and/ or his baby's mother—that just added to hers. He tried to fuck her out of remembering the issues, before he asked her to borrow money. You want money and security, she said, you get old balls. You want young balls, you picking up checks and dealing with all this bullshit.

I nodded in agreement, told her I might be aiming for old balls for now. She said I was still young, could afford to waste time. She couldn't.

We headed down Century Boulevard, passing a string of dollar stores, liquor stores, and beauty supply shops. LA is one big track, Tiffani said, pointing at the Black girl in the short shorts and tank top walking through a parking lot. She said all the girls we kept passing walking up and down the street were working. White girls, black girls, Asian girls, she said, they all hoing. I knew to believe.

Somehow the new white girl at the Office who'd started a few days ago and had already gotten fired for coming to work drunk with another bottle in her bag came up. Tiffani said she was doing more than drinking. She had meth mouth. Had never heard of meth mouth, confirmed with Google images.

Them drunk white girls will get you every time, Tiffani said, sticking her arm out the window. Been like this all through history. Every time a nigga end up in jail there's some drunk white girl somewhere close behind. Down south, man, a nigga call himself helping some stranded white girl on the side of the road with a flat tire end up in a noose around his neck getting dragged down the road on the back of a pickup.

Deadass though, I said. Kobe. Tupac. Tiger. Saying Emmett Till or OJ seemed too easy.

But they still fucking with them, she said, disgust wrinkling her face.

Tiffani said she was glad the white girl was gone, that she couldn't chance her doing something stupid and fucking with her freedom.

Freedom. A word Tiffani used often. She was always talking about how she'd never lose it again, constantly making sure potential benefits of every situation outweighed the costs, the main cost being her freedom. She said you could never understand until you'd been through what she'd been through. Day after day in that cell, feeling like you're wasting away while the rest of your life leaves you behind. She was grateful for fresh air.

Sometimes I wondered what she meant by freedom. How she could consider herself free. Almost every decision she made was defined by her criminal record, the color of her skin, her vagina. She couldn't rent most apartments, get most jobs, didn't qualify for public assistance, couldn't vote or be elected into office. She had a suspended license because she refused to step foot in any building with police to pay her parking tickets. Her boyfriend told her to just mail it in but she wanted a guarantee that the payment was received.⁹

Before we went back to the Office, Tiffani stopped by her boyfriend's apartment to give him some of the money she made the day before.

We spent the night at a 24-hour spa in Koreatown. Just so you know, she said before we left, it's a nude spa.

Like completely naked the whole time? I asked.

She said admission came with a robe and a towel.

Tiffani's body was perfect. Her breasts stayed in the same spot when she took her bra off in the locker room. She said she got her breast implants as soon as she could afford them (right after she got married) because she was tired of perverted men approaching her because she had the body of a child. She had the body of a mature teenager that night, said she'd lost ten pounds since we met between the stress of her kids and her man. The most obvious ten pounds I'd ever seen.

The next week Tiffani wasn't feeling well, didn't come into work all week. She texted me to ask if I'd take one of her clients since I was in the Office. I hesitated responding at first. I didn't know exactly what went on during her session but I was fairly certain I could not compete nor did I want to. Was this one of the clients she had sex with? Would he be disappointed when I opened the door? Did he like darker women? What would he tell Tiffani afterwards. Please, girl, she texted me. She said he wouldn't leave her alone and that I'd be doing her a big favor so I agreed. She said she sent him the link to my ad so he already knew what to expect and was excited. I didn't bother asking her if he actually said he was excited.

He was a somewhat attractive white man in his forties, tall, well-built, spent the entire hour talking about Tiffani: how sexy she was, how beautiful she was, how much he loved her new hair color, how he watched her porn over and over, how he couldn't get enough of her. She's just so cool, he kept saying. It's hard to find people like that, who are so genuine and just all around good, chill people. I really like that about her.

*We think sometimes we're only drawn to the good, but we're actually drawn to the authentic. We like people who are real more than those who hide their true selves under layers of artificial niceties.*¹⁰

I completely agreed, had been drawn to Tiffani's genuineness myself, but the compliments turned somewhat bad-mannered after the second or third one. It was like being on a date with someone who kept talking about his ex. I felt inadequate.

Two minutes after he left, I got a text from Tiffani: *Chris just texted me, she's no Tiffani.*

Two days later I woke up to a series of text messages from Tiffani. She'd just come home from the ER. She said she woke up in the middle night in excruciating pain. Her daughters are really killing her, I thought. She called me later, spent the whole conversation talking about how well her boyfriend was taking care of her. I was happy for her until I wasn't. While I was glad she was finally being taken care of, I still wanted her to have more. But maybe that was why I was the one home alone while she was with her man.

Her happiness was gone as quickly as it came. Since she hadn't worked all week she couldn't make her rent, opened her door to an eviction notice. Within 24 hours, she'd packed up all her belongings, took some of the stuffed garbage bags to her oldest daughter's apartment. She said staying there wasn't an option, the place was too dirty with roaches and rats.

Tiffani came back to work with the backseat and trunk of her SUV full of clothes and shoes and toiletries and groceries. She said she would just make enough money to get a motel room while she figured out what she was going to do. I told her she could stay with me but she wanted to be alone, wanted a room of her own, even if it was only for the night.

A room of one's own. Reminded me of Virginia's Woolf's famous book, but more so Alice Walker's womanist critique. In the essay *In Search of Our Mother's Garden's*, Walker writes: *Virginia Woolf, in her book A Room of One's Own, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself. What then are we to make of Phyllis Wheatley a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.*¹¹

I guess that was what Tiffani meant by freedom.

A day later after Tiffani's eviction, one of Rhonda's tenants who'd been renting a room in her back-house moved out. Tiffani moved in the next day. It was a do-it-yourself efficiency: a small room with a kitchen and bathroom she shared with the tenant next door. Wasn't exactly the place of her own that she'd hoped for but she made it her home nonetheless, decorated with some of the things in her car, pictures of her kids, a cheetah print comforter. She was happy and back at work the next day.

It was a decent day. We—me, Tiffani, and Alice—each had multiple appointments. I finished a session and sat in the reclining chair in the lobby, listening to the noises coming from Room 3. Usually I tuned them out with a book or my own music but something about the sounds made me listen harder, and I knew Tiffani wouldn't mind. I heard the voice of a man thanking

God. Your pictures weren't lying, the voice said. Thank you so much. No, really. You don't understand. Thank you ... This feels so good. Then silence. A few minutes later, Tiffani walked out the room, trying to stop her upper lips from drawing back and embarrassing the client with laughter.

He was so loud, I whispered.

I know, right? she said. He's a war vet, has erectile dysfunction after getting shot in the head, something about it messing up his nerves. Didn't think his dick still worked until me. Said I changed his life.

She grabbed some hot towels and headed back into the massage room.

P.M.S. (POST MESSAGE SYNDROME): AN ESSAY

*Sometimes paranoia's just having all the facts.*¹²

—WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

*Ran the streets tongue-tied, couldn't sleep nights
'Cause when you're living wrong, it's hard to sleep right
But it is what it is, gotta eat right*¹³

—YOUNG JEEZY

*She's always paranoid, watching the law inside the streets /
Undercovers and dummies that look like decoys / Remember
sergeant let her slide / Said if he seen what's between her thighs
he'd compromise*¹⁴

—KENDRICK LAMAR

Now this is strange, he said, stopping short a few inches inside the lobby. I watched his dark eyes as they cased the room.

Excuse me? I said.

This is strange, he repeated, I mean, this setup. He was white and average looking with a crew cut, maybe 40, wearing loose-fitting blue jeans and a light blue fleece jacket. I wasn't expecting *this* in this building, he continued, his head moving slowly as he talked like he was under hypnosis. I watched as he looked left at the oriental room dividers, then right at the mirrors on the wall, then left again.

I told him he could leave if he felt uncomfortable but he wanted to stay.

No, no, he said. It's fine, it's fine.

I walked him to Room 3, all ready to give my spiel—you can change, leave your clothes...—when he stuck a handful of bills in my face. Here's 300, he said. Is this enough?

It doesn't cost that much, I said over the money, making sure not to touch it. You can change and I'll be back in a few minutes.

I closed the door and rushed over to Tiffani, who was sitting on the reclining chair behind the partition.

Yo, he's weird as hell, I said. I grabbed some clean hand towels to soak in the water bucket and put in the microwave. (The towel warmer was broken and Rhonda was too cheap to replace it.) You think he's a cop?

Girl, that's what I was just thinking, Tiffani said. That hair cut. And he's loud as fuck.

Should I ask him to leave?

Just go in there, Tiffani said while taking off her wig, do a regular massage. Don't take anything off. If he's not hard by the time you're ready to turn him over, get out of there.

I considered the situation for a minute before going back inside, opened the door expecting him to be laying face down, butt naked on the massage table. Instead he was bent over in the corner holding something in his hand. Sorry, he said, just looking for an outlet to charge my phone. Well, phone battery.

He dangled the evidence, a charger with a large rectangular BlackBerry battery clasped inside. Didn't realize they still made those. He said his kids bought him the phone for Christmas with an extra battery since his phone was always dying. *Is he telling the truth? It is really just a battery? Or is it some device that will record everything that happens so he can use it later in court?*

Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.

I took the charger and battery, told him I'd plug it in in the lobby. I did. When I came back in the room, he was laying face down on the table with a towel covering his ass and socks on his feet. No one ever kept their socks on...or towel. Are his socks on because he knows he'll be putting his orthopedic-looking sneakers back on the few minutes? Will he be putting his orthopedic-looking sneakers back on in a few minutes because there's about to be a raid or because he's going to kill me, cut up my body into little piece, and find some place to stash my remains? Or does he already have a place? Is he one of the serial killers LAPD don't seem in a rush to find since they only kill prostitutes?

You have smelly feet or something? I said as playfully as I could muster, hoping for some explanation to soothe my anxiety.

No, I just showered before I got here. Just kept them on for some reason.

Okay, I'm just gonna grab some more lotion. The bottle on the table was full. I went back in the lobby, closed the door behind me. I looked behind the partition. Tiffani was gone. Did she leave because she knows the cops are coming? Am I on my own? Did they take her? I checked my phone to see if she texted me.

Nothing.

I went back into the massage room empty-handed. He was still laying there, face down with the towel covering his ass and black socks scrunched at his ankles.

I started the massage. He was talkative, asked me what I was studying in school, said he saw I was a student from my ad, wanted to know what I planned on doing with my degree, my ideal job. In between thinking that he was attempting to elicit information he could use against me in court, I told him I studied English with a focus in African American literature and that I liked to write but had no idea what I wanted to do in terms of a career. He said I should do whatever made me happy, what I was passionate about, maybe look into a job with OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network. After a while, I couldn't figure out who was doing the pretending.

Twenty minutes passed and he still hadn't touched me, not even a half hearted graze of the thigh while I massaged his back and legs. Most clients' hands finagled their way from their sides to reach for your thigh or panties—if they were really lucky what was underneath them (if you were even wearing any). It could be hard to differentiate between clients who were too shy to touch you, men who respected you, and the police.

Another sign. He didn't spread his legs when I massaged his inner thighs. How they usually signaled they wanted your hands to go higher, much higher.

You can turn over now, I said. I put a pillow under his head. The towel fell to the floor. His dick pointed straight to the old paneled ceiling. Success.

I was partially relieved, Tiffani's word echoing in my mind. Still scared. Cops got hard too. They also broke rules and got away with it more often than we did.

Wow, you have beautiful breasts, he said. I'm a breast man. Do you mind, he asked, putting his left hand in the air toward my body. I moved closer.

So how much does this cost, he asked? I froze. No one asked about prices in the middle of a session. Setup.

Nothing, I said. Everything is free.

He laughed, then said, No, seriously.

I am serious.

Well, okay. How much to help you out a little with school?

Nothing, nothing at all.

Okay, fine.

He put his face between my breasts while I reached between his thighs. I hated the idea of doing this for free but it beat another night in jail and a possible felony for prostitution. He shook when he came. That was great, really great, he said.

Let me get you some hot towels, I said.

I walked to the peephole to check for men in uniform, maybe undercover. Nothing. I was still weary. What if he hasn't told them to come up yet and they're still downstairs?

Tiffani and Alice were sitting on the couch behind the partition. Tiffani came back for me. You alright? she asked.

He walked out of the massage room with this look on his face like he knew something I didn't. I left a couple more hundreds for you, he said. A couple more hundreds? As in \$500? I wondered if the increase in money bumped up the charges against me or something. Who pays \$500 for a massage with no sex and barely any touching?

You didn't need to do that, I said.

I'm on the way to the casino, he said. Hopefully you will bring me luck.

He walked toward the door. As my fingers wrapped around the door knob, he stopped at the counter beside it, placed his jacket on top of the candy jar, looked around again. You going to be here later tonight? he asked. So you can come back and kill me or are the cops coming later, I wanted to ask. No. Going home.

I turned to Tiffani and Alice. He left \$500, I said. I can't tell if I'm asking a question or making a statement.

\$500? Tiffani repeated. We getting the fuck out of here. You need to go first.

I jettied for my oversized tote bag by the sofa, holding all my books and laptop and extra clothes. I couldn't handle the additional burden. I just grabbed my ID and car keys, threw on a jacket, ran barefoot out the door and up the stairwell. The cops might've been waiting for me downstairs.

I spent the next hour with Tiffani in the parking lot across the street from the Office smoking a blunt in my rental car. Both her ideas, the blunt and looking out for anything suspicious from a distance. Between inhales, Tiffani said she couldn't believe what just happened, that everything seemed off all week.

See, that's why I'm glad Rhonda has that camera, Tiffani said. She said it made her feel safe.

I honestly don't think it's for our protection at all, I said. She just wanted to make sure we didn't rip her off.

We kept smoking.

Sitting in that car, we were like battered soldiers home from war. High alert, exhibiting telltale signs, according to Mayo Clinic, of PTSD: flashbacks, negative thoughts, hyper-arousal, self-destructive behavior. The job or symptoms of a lifetime of being Black in America?¹⁵

I never known someone to have an operation like that and not run it, meet the girls and enforce law, but I don't know.

I told her she'd make a lot more money if she worked on her own.

Yeah, she said, I see that too, but I'm so scared of getting caught. I know I'll make a g a day on my own, but I can't afford to get busted. They might keep me because I have a prior. It won't be just an RNR. And I be worried I can't get a client to leave if I'm in a hotel or alone. I low-key been reluctant to go in because I pay a lot. No one stays there.

She said since she'd started working at the Office three months ago, she'd already seen three girls come and go.

We kept smoking.

I can't believe how fast you were out, Tiffani said, giggling. I'm like where the fuck did Crystal go.

You said I needed to be the first one out of there.

I didn't realize she wasn't talking about me when she said, you need to be the first one out of here. She was talking about Alice.

Can't have no old lady in jail, she said. I couldn't handle that.

Tiffani didn't talk much about jail, other than it was somewhere she was never going back to. The two years she spent up North was enough. She said despite Rhonda's issues, the Office was safer than working the track and she had to do whatever needed to be done to stay out of jail. She wasn't going back, wouldn't even step foot in a station to pay a ticket. Why her license was suspended now.

It started raining, a light steady rain. Halfway into the blunt Rhonda called my phone. Alice told her to check on us. I gave her a recap. If you didn't do nothing, you don't have nothing to worry about, she said. You didn't do nothing, right?

Nope, I said, and I told him the massage was free.

Okay, so you good then. But if you did do something you need to tell me.

Nothing, I said, not even considering the truth. No one could be trusted. She said to let her know when went back to the Office and got our things.

I hung up but I was still a little shook. So was Tiffani. I could tell because she was sitting there silent, still looking straight ahead across the street. We went back inside ten minutes later, made it fast. I picked up the \$500 off the table with my shirt.

I woke up the next morning to a text from Rhonda: You didn't leave your money for your hour appointment at 8:30 last night. I checked three times.

A few nights later I was headed to a friend's apartment in West Hollywood to celebrate her 27th birthday when I was pulled over by two LAPD officers. As I past the Laugh Factory on the corner

of Sunset and Laurel, I noticed a police car in my rear view mirror. My mother had warned me about Fords, said the acronym really stood for Found On Road Dead.

I felt my breathing heavy, my racial vertigo taking hold. I made a left turn on the next block—Selma. Seconds later, the siren came on. Red. White. Blue. I pulled over, just feet away from my friend's apartment. Two Latino officers approached the Ford Focus on either sides, shined their flashlights through the windows. I sat there in terror. The officer beside the driver's window, his face so close I could smell his breath, said my lights were out, a sign of drunk driving. Something about him reminded me of George Lopez. I tried for a casual tone while explaining that it was a rental and that the lights must have been manual and I was used to automatic. He scanned the inside of the car, put his flashlight directly into my eyes, then took my identification and went back to his flashing LAPD Sheriff car.

I kept my hands visible, thinking about the video I'd watched the week before of LAPD fatally shooting an unarmed homeless man six times on Skid Row. His name was Afrika. I'd read about LA, Rodney King, the murder of mentally-ill Ezell Ford, gun downed by two officers while lying on the ground on the corner of West 65th and Broadway in South LA two days after Michael Brown. I knew that Los Angeles was home to the world's largest juvenile halls, county jails, largest probation department, heard firsthand accounts of women being handcuffed, restrained, sexually assaulted by officers in the backseats of squad cars, on the street, and I knew that they did this with great regularity. I'd seen the video of Kim Nguyen who'd been handcuffed in Koreatown on St. Patrick's Day and later that night thrown from a moving LAPD car, left to lay in her blood, her blue skirt hiked up, bunched up around her stomach. Abduction and rape by the LAPD is pretty rampant, especially in areas like this, noted a commenter after watching the footage. Everybody knows exactly what happened to this poor young lady.

LAPD killed 1 person per week since 2000. 82% were black or brown read a chalk-inscribed P. S. A. outside LAPD headquarters in November 2014 after the Missouri officer who shot and killed unarmed Michael Brown was cleared of all charges. (The year of my arrest, the LAPD would kill more people than any other law enforcement agency in the country.)

I replayed all of this as I sat in that rental car, in their clutches, waiting, then barefoot on the sidewalk, their personal Black American spectacle performing a roadside sobriety test. I stood on the cement following the officer's finger back and forth, was then instructed to take nine steps, heel-to-toe, along a straight line and back again while enclaves of white people in flannel nightgowns and Saturday night uniforms, short dresses and skirts, sequence, five-inch heels, watched from their lawns and sidewalks, from behind their closed windows. My five-inch heels were in the passenger seat next to my purse and my friend's birthday present.

He instructed me to close my eyes and stand with one foot six inches off the ground for 30 seconds, then chuckled and said most people couldn't do this sober. I closed my eyes, all the while aware that onlookers and video cameras don't stop the killing of Black people, that the threat of death is always as real as death itself. I remember it had gotten chilly, my bare legs being covered in goose bumps, feet dirtied. After I passed the test, the cop from the passenger side walked over to Lopez and I heard him say, She seems fine. Just let her go? Lopez wasn't having it. He was having too much fun. He wanted a Breathalyzer. My tears didn't faze him.

With still water and rage cradling my eyes, I told him I didn't feel comfortable breathing into anything he had control over.

See, Lopez said, at first I was going to help you. I rolled my eyes. The cops from the prostitution sting in 2011 said the same thing, I wanted to say to him, before charging me with two felonies and a misdemeanor. I was going to help you, he said again, but I don't like your tone. He said I was condescending, too articulate to act so dumb. All I heard: being Black and intelligent cannot save you. No amount of degrees can immunize you from history's flawed racial logic.

You have a bad attitude, Lopez said. You need to cooperate. He made it sound as if my tone and the thoughts running through my mind were just fictions I'd concocted to justify unjustifiable anger, as if the message from the state being spoon-fed to Black people every day wasn't clear: You are not free. You control nothing, especially not your body. It can be taken at any moment.

Still, for a second, truth be told, I found myself wondering if maybe my anger was unjustified, if I was just another skeptic, a Black paranoid like the street corner soapbox

evangelists prognosticating about everything from the assassination of MLK to the Illuminati, the crazy Black folk from around the way who sit on their stoops illuminating residents as they walk by of the truth about HIV, which like crack, fried-chicken franchises, and those Tropical Fantasy sodas only sold in bodegas, was created to destroy Black people, make us sterile. Or did that cop really have hate in his mind, envy in his heart, and niggers these days on the tip of their thin wet lips? Was I just another stilted racial paranoiac, part of a hopeless people just looking for something to believe in, or Black in America with reasonable doubt?

Four more police cars pulled up to the scene. I must be worthy. As I stood barefoot, leaning against the flashing cop car, watching them park, I thought about Tupac and how crazy it was that all the things he'd said over twenty-five years ago still held true today. I thought about the scene in the documentary *Thug Angel: The Life of an Outlaw* when Pac's at a gun range sporting a purple tee, backwards fitted, and bright red ear protectors, spitting knowledge about the police and state violence: The police ain't nothing but a gang. The National Guard is a gang. The army is a gang. We learn all our gang shit from the government...Somebody gets a gun, the government gets a bigger gun.

A white woman officer with large cold hands patted me down for drugs and weapons I didn't have, grazed along my inner thighs, toyed with my bra, tilted it to see if drugs fell out. She kept asking if I had marijuana or any other contraband in my possession. Thank God I smoked it all yesterday. Now, it's only a misdemeanor, she said. Once they book you, it becomes a felony. She wasn't taking no for an answer. I think she was enjoying my Black body too much, felt me up more than I touched some of my clients. I didn't know who should be paying whom. She kept patting. Now this is the real exploitation, I thought. At least clients paid and it was consensual.

Another chubby white officer with small hands and big ears stuck his iPhone in my face and recorded Lopez reading me my rights before handcuffing me and sticking me in the backseat of his car. I wondered if it was the same car Kim Nguyen had been assaulted in and thrown out of or the car officers Luis Valenzuela and James Nichols used those years they forced women they'd arrested for drug possession to have sex with them and perform oral sex while the other officer kept watch.

We went to a nearby hospital for a blood test (a blood test that would months later with the help of an attorney I couldn't afford confirm that I was not under the influence). The nurse asked if I was suicidal, if I felt like hurting myself or someone else. I'd rather not answer that question, I said. I don't want additional charges being brought against me. After she drew two containers of blood, I was booked at the West Hollywood Sheriff's station where Lopez told the Black officer on duty that I was a trouble maker with a bad attitude as I was fingerprinted, told to take off my wig, and locked in a cell. I sat on the twin-sized cot in that small solitary box laughing most of the night to stop from crying. Thank God I'm not a prostitute.

LAUGH 'TIL IT (DON'T) HURT: AN ESSAY

*...laughter is more serious. More complicated, more serious than tears.*¹⁶

—TONI MORRISON

*There's no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it.*¹⁷

—JAMES BALDWIN

*Great stories happen to people that can tell them.*¹⁸

—IRA GLASS

You attract yourself. Even if it's unconscious, you look for your own reflection. That was how Milly described us meeting. Not coincidence, necessity. Milly was a chubby thirty-year old Dominicana with a pretty face and Bronx accent. We met in March 2015 after I responded to an ad she'd posted online looking for someone to sublet her apartment in Miracle Mile, a trendy yet historic district of museums, restaurants, office buildings, and apartment complexes sandwiched between Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. After five weeks of crashing on an old roommate's sofa, I'd decided to look for a room of my own near Beverly Hills, a neighborhood where clients wouldn't try to haggle, make payment plans for a massage, say they couldn't make it once I told them the address.

Milly told me the place was mine as soon as she saw me, said the others who'd tried to rent it gave her bad vibes, one looked like a prostitute off the street. I wanted to ask her if she had a problem with prostitutes, then decided against it. Plus she liked that I was a graduate student working on my dissertation, which meant I wouldn't be any trouble. I didn't bother mentioning that my dissertation was basically on prostitutes or that I planned to use her apartment as an in-call location for body rubs.

Two days after our initial meeting, Milly handed me her keys in exchange for \$1,500 in cash, told me if I needed anything, she'd be staying nearby at her boyfriend's apartment. I figure

why not make some extra money, she said. No need for two places when I can just stay with him and I could use the money since I've been sick and haven't been working.

Her studio was hot and compact, overpopulated with clothing racks on the verge of breaking from the excess weight, bookcases of novels, self-help books, notebooks, CDs, and DVDs—the first movie I noticed was *Pretty Woman* on a shelf beside *The Notebook* and *The Bodyguard*—and multiple pairs of Timbs on her shoe rack. Classic New Yorker. A few days after I settled in—unpacked my backpack and arranged my books—Milly called and asked if she could come over to pick up her phone charger. Her quick visit turned to five hours. You mind if I stay for a while? she asked. Have some girl talk. I don't really have any friends here. Neither did I. I'd first moved to L.A in 2010 after graduating from college, lived a few blocks from Milly's apartment with a friend, found a job at an adult massage studio to pay my bills. The next year I started grad school at the University of Pennsylvania, ended up massaging from my apartment to pay my bills, and eventually decided to write about my experiences for my dissertation. The only people I really talked to in LA were my old roommate, clients, and some of the girls I used to work with at the Office—what we all called the four-room massage studio—who'd gone from co-workers to friends to informants.

Milly sat in the black pleather office chair in the corner in front of a small computer desk cluttered with papers and books on acting and dealing with depression. I sat in her bed with my iPad in my lap.

She asked me about the books I'd put on her desk. They had titles like *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and Its Women*, *Working Sex*, *Flesh for Fantasy*, *Tricks and Treats: Sex Workers Write About Their Clients*.

I tried to gauge her tone, figure out if she was questioning for judgment or genuine interest. She was hard to decipher. Research for school, I said. What I told everyone at first. She picked up the book with the red and black cover. *Flesh for Fantasy*. The subtitle was less noticeable: *Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance*.

What's this one about? she asked.

Stories about women who strip and the people who study strippers, I said.

Would you strip? she asked.

I paused. Honestly, I said. No. I don't have the upper body strength or confidence to be naked in a room full of people. I'm more of a one-on-one kind of girl. Would you?

My mom's a stripper, she said.

Really?

Yeah.

That's impressive. Like it's seriously a sport.

Yeah, it is. Would you escort? she asked.

I paused again. I don't know, I said. I thought about it before, but I'm not sure. I think I'd charge more than most people would be willing to pay. Would you?

I used to, she said with ease, like I'd asked her if she ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

She said she started escorting back in 2010 after she'd moved to LA from NY to pursue her acting career. She took on odd jobs—cashier, makeup artist, restaurant hostess—but it was never enough. Then came the eviction notice.

I remember I didn't eat for six days, she said. It was either go to a shelter or work the street and I wasn't going to no fucking shelter. Her round, olive face was unchanged. My first client, I'll never forget him. He gave me \$100, I had sex with him, and I ate for the first time in six days.

She said she escorted for a year. Burbank, North Hollywood, Downey, Glendale, you name it, I escorted. She had a pimp for about five months who posted her ads online, answered her calls. She was bomb, Milly said. And she made money. I used to give her 40% of what I was making. And as an escort I made money, I mean money. So she was making money. That's why when I left, she threatened to kill me.

Oh, wow, I said.

Yeah, that bitch was crazy.

Okay, I said, so she posted your ads and picked up the phone. That is work, but like, I hate how much money people make off of us. I've been asking girls if they feel exploited and they tell me no. At least the dudes are paying.

Milly kept nodding her head and saying mmhmm.

I'm realizing, I said, I feel more exploited by the people making money off me who ain't doing shit. Like the pimps and these fucking websites charging \$10, \$50, \$200 to post.

Exactly, she said. So I left and I was escorting on my own between March 2012 and June 15, 2012.

Milly may not have remembered most of her clients but the day she turned her last trick slipped off the tip of her tongue like saliva. June 15, 2012. She said she hadn't escorted since then, you could offer her \$5,000 and she wouldn't take it. Now she was doing strictly dominatrix, fetishes, and massage.

You didn't think anything was weird about my apartment? she asked.

I mean, I did wonder about all the towels and the oil but I really wasn't paying it much attention. I didn't tell her that I was too focused on trying to make money to be thinking about anything other than evading the police and men worthy of *Lifetime* movies like *The Craigslist Killer*. I had to make that \$1500 back and hopefully a profit.

Two hours later and we were in the same spots—me on the bed, her alternating the desk chair and futon across from the bed—trading stories. Do you ever get paranoid? I asked her. I'm always scared a client will be a cop or killer.

I don't think negative; therefore I don't attract negative things, she said. I felt like I was listening to someone read a fortune cookie. I have a pact with her—she pointed to the ceiling—and I pray. I pray a lot. I don't assume somebody's a cop and I've never had a problem, never been arrested, thank God. I have a pact and she protects me. You shouldn't be paranoid.

I told her I didn't really mean paranoid, more so aware, and there was a difference, but if we're being honest, she had me second-guessing myself for a minute, wondering if maybe I was paranoid., especially when she gave me that look, the same face I used to make at those conspiracy theory-preaching old heads on the block back in New York, the ones quick to warn

you when you walked by about why shouldn't drink anything from the bodega that they didn't sell in the white man's store, especially that Tropical Fantasy and City Club. But, then again, quiet as it's kept, minus the KKK selling sperm-killing soda in the hood, most of those theories could be backed up with a quick Google search, and they were reputable searches, not just Wikipedia and Illuminati websites. All you had to do was type in COINTELPRO, Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, CIA and crack.

Milly's night table was covered with miniature dolls so small they'd break in the hands of a child, candles, and a burgundy bible. There was a glass filled halfway with water on the kitchen counter next to the microwave when you opened her front door and another half-full glass beside her bed. I asked her the significance. She said the glass next to her bed kept the bad dreams and negativity away so you can truly rest. She said she had insomnia and it helped her sleep, that sometimes when you woke up, the water would be full of bubbles. That was all the negativity. You had to throw the water out the front door, and refill the cup each night until the water was clear and there were no more bubbles in the morning. The one by the door behind the microwave, she said, that attracts negative energy when people walk by.

They're for protection, she said. You don't have to believe in it, but I do.

No, I said. I think everyone has to believe in something. Honestly, I don't think it's possible to survive without having something to believe in in this fucked up ass world.

Exactly, she said. She said she grew up Pentecostal but now her religion was simply God. I believe in God, she said, and I'm very happy with that.

After you've been arrested, I said, it's kind of hard not to think like that. It's not that I'm negative, I'm precautious. I couldn't tell if I was explaining for her or for myself. I told her about my arrest, how I'd been working as a masseuse for less than a week at some gym near Beverly Hills when the place was raided by four or five LAPD officers in a prostitution sting operation, that I'd taken the job because I wanted to make more money than I'd been making at the other spa, which was near the airport, near the hood.

Milly told me her last escort client was a cop. She said he was a nice white dude, tall, older, good-looking. And he looked like a cop, she said. His car looked like it was a cop's and he

just felt like a cop to me, but I'm not paranoid. I was like, I can't assume, I'm good, God protects me, you know, whatever, I'm good. So he comes in, pays me, I have sex with him, everything's good. He's about to leave, puts on his clothes, and goes, Can I talk to you for a sec? Sure. He goes, what's your real name? 'Cause he knew me as Jenny, you know that's my name, my whatever name. He goes, I know it's not Jenny, so what's your real name. I was like, it's Milly.

Oh, I said shocked, you gave him your real name? I would've given him another fucking fake name.

No, no, no, Milly said. I can't explain it to you. I felt comfortable with him. I can't explain it to you. So I go, it's Milly. He goes, what you're doing is illegal, you know that? I'm like yeah, I know. If you don't stop doing what you're doing, you're gonna get caught and you're gonna go to jail. You're a really nice girl, I wouldn't want anything like that to happen to you. He was like, just do the domination. If a cop stepped in here and you're a dominatrix, that's not illegal. You're not soliciting sex; you're not doing anything. He goes, I'm just giving you some advice, take it or leave it, it's cool, but you're a really nice girl, I really like you. I'll call you again. So I was like okay. He leaves and no lie, like I closed the door and I started crying for like three hours. I was like, this is a warning. God's talking to me. I need to listen. I'm gonna get arrested, this is the end. So I remember I got on my knees, I started praying and was like, You want me to stop doing this? Is that what You want? That was when she made the pact.

Milly said what she really feared wasn't police but Black clients. She'd been robbed twice while working, both times by Black men.

That night, I kept thinking about what Milly said about you attracting yourself, searched the Internet for more insight. I didn't realize when she said it that she was really just relaying the Law of Attraction. *Like attracts like*. According to New Thought philosophy, by focusing on positive or negative thoughts a person brings positive or negative experiences into their life. *You attract into your life those things, circumstances and conditions that correspond with the nature of your dominant, habitual thoughts and beliefs, both conscious and subconscious*, writes Tania

Kotsos. Every area of your life, including your health, your finances and all of your relationships, are influenced by this great universal law that like attracts like.

What had I been thinking when I met Milly? I wondered. I was looking for a place to attract wealthy clients. Had our common goal brought us together? I thought about the other people I'd met in LA. In just a few days, I'd met a stripper while getting my hair done at a salon on Melrose. A young, attractive Afro-Latina came in and sat in the chair beside me while she waited for the hairdresser to finish applying my highlights. She talked about needing extensions for the first time because another stylist had chopped her hair off and she needed to look right for her upcoming trip to Vegas to make money at the Pacquiao fight (*Girl, I'm about to rack up*, she said.) A couple days later, I ordered an Uber from the Office to take me back to the apartment. The driver was a slender, twenty-something Black woman with a picture of her son on her dashboard, told me to sit in the front. Her car seat and personal belongings were in the back. She asked me about the book I was reading. It said SEX WORK in huge red letters across the front. I usually tried to hide it, not realizing the bold red font was purposely forcing you to do the opposite. It either made people uncomfortable or intrigued them. I told her it was a book about women in the industry. She asked why I was reading it. I said it was for school. I sensed she wanted to know more, so I told her I worked as a masseuse. She said she did private dancing part-time and occasionally escorted, but was looking for a job that didn't require sex. I recommended massage. As I write, I find myself wondering if they were all sent to me by some higher power, if I am being used as some sort of vessel to relay a message. Am I doing a good job? Do I even know what the message is?

Milly came back over a few days later, said she needed to pick up her scale. She told me she was on her way around 4. She knocked on the door around 6, said she'd walked all the way from Hollywood, almost five miles. I walk everywhere, she said, walking toward the couch. My exercise. She had on leggings, an oversized t-shirt with a large oval of sweat on the back, and running sneakers. She sat on the futon. Had we been good friends and it had been my actual apartment and not hers, I would've jokingly suggested she take a shower before sitting down.

Instead I told her I was about to watch *Being Mary Jane* on the DVR. You mind if I stay, she asked. Of course not, I said.

I can't stand her, Milly said during a commercial. She's too stuck up. She was talking about Mary Jane.

Ehh, I said. I get what you're saying, but I think she's a great character overall. She's a beautiful, educated, successful Black woman with flaws and I appreciate her. Shit, I see myself in her. How many Black women masturbate on television? I love this woman. And have you seen the dudes she bags? Fucking beautiful.

I'd heard and read all the critiques of the show. In *Being Mary Jane*, Gabrielle Union plays the lead role of Mary Jane Paul, a beautiful, successful brown-skinned journalist who appears to have it all yet constantly struggles in balancing her personal life, romantic relationships, career, and family obligations as a middle-aged Black woman trying to figure out what happiness means and looks like for people like us. A lot of people feel that Mary Jane is stuck up and bitter, that she, like Olivia Pope on *Scandal*, is just a side chick making Black women look bad and desperate, that we need more Claire Huxtables on television, more positive representations of Black women. What these critiques ignore are the show's inherent value, the power of seeing yourself on the screen. *Being Mary Jane* is like an updated, more focused version of *Living Single*, unlike anything else on television. Unlike all the reality television shows flooding the airways—*Love and Basketball* and *Real Housewives* and all their spin-offs—it offers a multidimensional portrayal of a Black woman, a flawed Black woman openly masturbating, stealing sperm in an attempt to beat her biological clock, having casual sex, all while starring in her own news show. She's like a less respectable, more realistic version of our mythicized *Oprah*. I was instantly hooked.

Milly's phone rang. She looked down at it on the desk. A client, she said. She hit the speakerphone button. Do you do all fetishes? the monotone voice asked. What did you have in mind? Milly said. A golden shower. Okay, sweetie, and when did you want to come? I'm going to need some time, I need to drink a lot of water and set up. Maybe six, he replied. It was almost

time for me to meet up with a friend in town from college. I nodded to let Milly know it was fine to use the apartment. Okay, sweetie, she said. I'll see you at 6. I'll text you the address.

When I got back to the apartment, Milly was watching television. *Jane the Virgin*. I sat at the edge of the bed. She asked me if I watched it. I told her I couldn't get into soaps, they were just too unrealistic.

You don't get it, she said.

She was right. I couldn't even get over the premise. A twenty-something virgin accidentally artificially inseminated during a routine visit to her gynecologist. I preferred something a tad more plausible. Milly said she grew up watching telenovelas with her family. She liked all the drama, following the story, the character development, still knowing that in the end there would be some version of happily ever after. And despite *Jane the Virgin's* over-the-top storyline, she said it was still relatable. And how often do we get to see Latinas on television, Milly said, not to mention in a leading role?

I'd learned in school, and from watching a lot of movies and television, that Latinos, like African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans, are either erased from media—both on and off screen—or poorly represented with stereotypical images. Between 2010 and 2013, despite making up 17 percent of the US population, not one Latino was cast in a lead role on a top ten movie or scripted network TV show.

When I tried to speak, Milly shushed me. The commercial break was over. This was the only time she was ever quiet in the apartment, excluding the occasional gasp and conversation with the screen. I can't life, after about ten minutes, I found myself talking to the screen too. You can't be serious ... No, Jane ... Damn, he looks good.

Premise: a sweet, naïve Latina who works at a hotel, takes the bus, and spends her life trying not to make the same mistakes as her mother, a hot mom who got pregnant when she was a teenager, constant mother-daughter fighting, a long-lost father, Catholic undertones throughout. Minus the whole virgin element, Milly could've written the show herself.

Once the show went off, Milly went on about how good it was. I told her it was okay but could see why she'd be into it.

She said she'd been working on some scripts herself but what she really wanted to be was a stand up comedienne. Like how many Latina comediennes do you know of? she asked me. I couldn't think of one. I was silent, just raised my eyebrows and squinted my eyes.

Exactly, she said. I'm too nervous, though, she said. I need to get over my stage fright. I told her every time she spoke it was like a routine. She didn't even realize it.

Really? she said.

No, seriously. It's like you're always on stage.

Milly reminded me of those street corner raconteurs, the men on the corner who could tell a story as easy as they could flash a smile.

The world needs to hear your stories, I said, slightly wanting to laugh at myself for the corniness of the words that had just come out of my mouth. But I really did need to hear them and so did other people. I'd gone to a writing workshop in Brooklyn about two months before I met Milly. There were five or six other women at the Monday night workshop, half-middle class and white. I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't want to tell them my story and honestly, I didn't want to hear theirs. I'd gone there seeking comfort, for women who looked like me, who could relate to my experiences. I didn't want to sit at a table with happy hookers who found the work completely empowering, who didn't understand what it was like as a woman of color in the industry. We are not allowed to be happy, I thought. Even as privileged as I was as a graduate student, most places still wouldn't hire me because of the color of my skin, I still made less than white girls with no formal education.

Milly started talking about her obsession with Chris Rock and Richard Pryor Richard Pryor is like my idol, she said.

Richard Pryor, I repeated. I love him. Pure genius. It made complete sense to me that she'd say Richard Pryor. What wise aspiring comedian wouldn't? As an aspiring anything, you're taught to learn from the greatest and there was no greater than Richard Pryor when it came to comedy, at least in my opinion. He was the patron saint of standup as truth-telling, used his

childhood and harsh realities—being a Black man in a racist country, growing up in a brothel where his mother was a prostitute and his grandmother was the madam, his addiction to drugs and women, quadruple bypass surgery, two heart attacks and suicide attempt—all to expose the social conditions of America while making the world laugh at the same time. He was the definition of laughing through the pain, consequences be damned. He held up a mirror and forced us to confront realities we too often preferred to ignore using humor, like sugarcoating a bitter medicine to help take away the sting.

I'd always had a thing for humor, started watching BET's *Comic View* in secret in elementary school, wrote my master's thesis on the Black female situation comedy, which I planned to continue for my dissertation. My first day of graduate school, in *Introduction to Communication* with the dean, each new student—there were 13 of us—had to go around the room, say their name, and what they planned to study. When it was my turn, I said, My name is Jasmine Salters and I am interested in the Black female situation comedy and the ways Black women use humor. The dean squinted like it wasn't the same answer that had gotten me into the program. Why is that important? he asked. Everyone looked down as if on cue. How is that communication? He hadn't asked anyone else these questions.

How is it not? I thought later on. Clearly he'd never been in a Black woman's kitchen or beauty parlor. Had never witnessed the magic of Black women telling jokes and stories. I grew up believing all Black women were these magical comedienues—from my mother and grandmothers to the ladies at the beauty parlor and the women dressed in all white at my local Baptist church—the way they turned pain to laughter so masterfully for a minute you actually thought the hurt had gone away. It wasn't until I was older that I realized the complexity of this humor, its ability to iterate issues that would otherwise remain silenced, to get us through the pain, how it gives Black women a sense of belonging, our own language and expression. In the *Introduction to Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*, Daryl Dance writes that *humor has been a means of surviving as we struggled. We laugh to hide our pain to shield our shame. We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack, to*

warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies and the hateful acts of friends and family.

Milly stared at her phone and sucked her teeth. I don't know why he keeps liking my shit, she said. She explained that her father, the man she'd only seen three or four times in her life, started following her on Instagram. I don't even know how he found me, she said, and he's always liking my pictures.

Everything Milly said left her full pink lips with such ease. Even when she mentioned being molested as a child, her mother abandoning her and her two little brothers, living on the street.

When I was 17, she told me, my mom met a dude and bounced and that was it. I used to call her crying, begging her to come home and she would hang up on me. After a while I got tired of calling. Her mother left her with her two little brothers, who were 12 and 14 at the time. They were on the street for a while, but Milly did everything she could to keep a roof over their heads. I didn't talk to my mom for like 8 years, Milly said. She left me by myself at 17 years old. I hadn't even had sex. I didn't know what I was doing and I got two kids. She laughed.

I wish I had a camera right now, I said. You're doing a standup routine right now and you're sitting on the couch. She smiled.

But my mom didn't have the capability to be a mother, Milly said. Some people, they just don't have it. That's the best way I can put it. She just didn't know how to be a mother. She didn't come from a broken home. My grandmother and grandfather were together until the day my grandfather died. She had a mother, she had a father. She does not come from a broken home. She doesn't even know what that is. She has no excuse. She just had no capability. I think it's funny when people say motherhood comes natural. Psh, not to everybody. It sure didn't come natural to my mother.

I felt like I was watching a novela. I was in awe. Milly had the complete background of the prostitutes in research books and Hollywood movies minus the look and sound of a victim.

So typical, right? she said, like she'd heard me thinking. I'm like the drug dealing whore, my other brother is the criminal, and my little brother is the good one. He always says hiss

motivation besides how we lived is to not be a statistic. He was like, we have a lot in common with those people in jail. They all come from broken homes like we do, my father's a drug dealer, my mother's a stripper, we have a lot in common.

I'm really proud of him, Milly said. Because we have different fathers, he thinks that's nasty. He thinks it's disgusting. He has two kids from the same woman, they're married, he has a really good job, apartment, goes to college, wants to do something with law. Her oldest brother was also a Mormon now. She said after he was in Vegas for a few years and couldn't find a job, he decided to join a church. He was like, religious people find you jobs and the closest church to the house was a Mormon church and they got him a job and he liked the job and the religion so he stayed. Like who thinks of that, joining a church to find a job? Milly said laughing.

Milly's other brother converted to Jehovah's Witness. Where my other brother lived, she said, everyone was Jehovah's Witness. I hate that religion, but it was good for him. He needed the order. He was in and out of jail for a long time since he was a teenager and the one really positive thing that came out of it, my brother always wanted a dad, and one of the Jehovah's Witnesses, he's been like a real father figure to him. So when he told me that, I started crying. So he's a Jehovah's Witness. And it changed his life. He stopped smoking, he stopped drinking, he hasn't been back to jail, he stopped dating prostitutes. He had a thing for prostitutes. He would only date prostitutes. It was crazy.

Milly sounded like a proud mother raving about her kids. I almost expected her to pull out photos or school projects with As written in red marker inside a circle on the corners.

Aww, I said, you're all doing so well. You should be really proud of yourself. I am and I just met you.

Laughter.

I've never done drugs, she said. I've never been arrested. I've never had legal problems. I've never sold drugs. I was an escort, but I've never got arrested for it. I've never done drugs. That's one thing I've never done. I've never done any drugs. I've never been a drug user. And I'm very proud of that. I've never even smoked weed, not once.

She mentioned never doing drugs about ten times that evening, like it was her badge of honor. One promise she made to herself that she refused to break. She might date a drug dealer, but she wouldn't get high off his supply.

Now Milly was looking for a new job in Beverly Hills, preferably in cosmetics. She said a man had just offered her job working at a food truck near the apartment. \$700 a week plus tips off the books, but she couldn't take it. I've had eating disorders my whole life, she said. Binge eating, bulimia. A food truck would be like fucking suicide.

I know what you mean, I said. I'd been struggling with depression and body issues since I was old enough to say the word fat.

Before Milly left she took the scale out of the bathroom. I weigh myself every day, at least two or three times, she said. That's not good for you, I said. I know, but I have to stay on top of my weight or I'll go crazy.

After about a week, we officially started sharing the apartment. Whenever Milly had a client, she'd come over. I was usually out, either at the Office or a writing workshop. She'd leave twenty or thirty dollars for me on the table before she left.

She got there before I left one day. I was in the apartment with Tiffani, a new girl from the Office I'd gotten close with quickly. Tiffani didn't know anything about Milly and the first thing she said after we left was that Milly looked permanently down, like she'd been through a whole lot of shit, hadn't even looked in the girl's face for a whole minute. I guess sadness knows sadness. It took me longer to see past the façade.

Milly made coming to the apartment a habit, even when she didn't have a client. She would stay until it got dark and her boyfriend called asking where she was, what they were having for dinner, if she could stop by the store and grab him a beer. Sometimes he'd dog her out on the phone, then she'd make excuses for him, say he was just cranky because he hadn't gotten enough sleep, that she'd made him mad earlier, that he wasn't usually like that.

I've never had a good relationship with a man, she told me later. I've had no luck with men. But I've never been arrested, thank God. But I've always had issues with men. That's been horrible. She said she pretty much only dated drug dealers. I told her I'd just had a conversation with someone about why good girls are attracted to criminals, usually drug dealers. I told her what I'd said. For me personally, when I was younger, I think it was something about the way they carried themselves, like they weren't afraid of anything, they walked like they were ready to take on the world and find a way to win no matter how much society worked to make sure they lost. I hadn't realized yet that they were the opposite of unafraid, that they carried their fear in the form of guns and bloodshot eyes.

Milly said she could explain it for herself, maybe not for everyone else, but she knew why she was so attract to criminals. She said her mom only fucked with drug dealers, including her father and her youngest brother's father, who was like her dad.

We used to go every week to visit him, my stepfather, in jail, she said, so the reason I date drug dealers is because I grew up going to jail to visit my stepfather. For years. So I always felt comfortable around criminals. Like to me they were normal people. I grew up going to jail and everyone I knew, all the men around me, were in jail. So, that to me was normal. So by the time I got older, I was attracted to men that sold drugs and had been to jail. That's what I was attracted to, 'cause that's what I grew up with, that was what I was used to from going to visit my stepfather. That was normal to me. That was a good man to me. A good man was a man that got locked up, sold drugs, and took care of his family. That was what I knew. That was my childhood. If you asked me, that's what my childhood was, jail, going to jail to visit my stepfather.

Every time I'd bring something up, she'd mention one of her ex-boyfriends. If I said the name of a movie, she'd seen it with an ex. If I mentioned a TV show, there was some ex who used to love watching it. If I wanted to go to a place, she'd been there already with an ex. All of them drug dealers. She said she stopped counting how many guys she'd been with once she got to 80. 80 was in 2011 before I started escorting she said, so who knows now. If I counted I'd be crying right now.

I told her I didn't like her boyfriend. I met him when she gave me the keys to the apartment. She said she could tell. He was a straight asshole. She knew it but made excuses for him. You know what they say about bad habits.

As soon as I saw him I could tell he was typical. The way he barely spoke, yelled at Milly like there wasn't another person in the room, watched her carry all her shit without offering a hand. I held the door open for her, took some of her bags downstairs. She thanked me for what felt like ten minutes. She was easy to please.

She told me her life philosophy on men. When you treat them good, she said, they don't respect you. When you treat them bad, they love you. They're happy. Every man I know that's really in love with their girl, she treats her man bad. If you treat them good, they don't love you. Every time I've treated a man good, it never worked out. I treated them bad, they loved me, wanted me to have their kids, proposed to me. Men are backwards. It's proven. It is what it is. I don't get.

One night Milly came to the apartment after she'd left some improv show nearby. I forget the excuse she used that time to visit, if she even bothered coming up with one. She looked the happiest I'd seen her. She said the friend she went with was a comedian and made her get on stage and perform impromptu. It wasn't really good, she said. I don't even remember what I said. She couldn't stop smiling. I suggested she consider taking a stand-up writing workshop. I gave her the link to a class I'd seen on the Internet. She said she'd think about it, didn't know if she had money to spend on something like that, but seriously wanted to give it a try.

My life has been really fucked up, she said. Like really fucked up. You don't even know the half. I just want to tell my stories, at least be able to laugh about it a little.

UN/MIRRORED: AN ESSAY

*To name ourselves rather than be names we must first see ourselves. For some of us this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look. Nevertheless, we can't theorize in a void; we must have evidence.*¹⁹

—LORRAINE O'GRADY

*Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered.*²⁰

—TA'NEHISI COATES

You don't have to do this, an officer whispers in my ear. He's standing beside me in the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, rolling my inked finger across a smudged fingerprinting pad. I don't say anything, just turn my head and raise my shoulder to my cheek as though wiping my face might wipe away his words. I don't know which makes me madder: him thinking he knows me or there being a part of me that agreed with him.

It is February of 2011. I've just been arrested in a prostitution sting at a gym in Century City, one of those wealthy, white enclaves on the edge of Beverly Hills. My third or fourth day working as one of the in-call erotic sports masseuses. I'd found the job on Craigslist. *Part-time body rub girl, full time pay.*

A man had called around lunchtime to make an evening appointment. He sounded normal on the phone, sweet even. Arrived on time, followed the instructions I'd given him: parked in the back lot, called when he was outside. I opened the back door to a tall, thin thirty-ish man in a pair of jeans, t-shirt, and baseball cap. He followed me to the massage room—the gym owner's private office where I'd set up a massage table beside the desk and chair, lit some scented candles on the tall shelf filled with lotions, oils, supplements, and fresh linen. Before he took off his clothes, he handed me \$300. The massage was only \$150.

As soon as the money touched my hand, like a hive of bees, five or six cops in navy jackets with LAPD written in gold letters across the back swarmed in. There was a theatrical

quality to it all—the way they cuffed me and read me my rights, stuck me in a rolling chair and interrogated me while the others searched the place. I was the only one there that night. I joined in on the performance, burst into award-worthy tears. Sobbed, shook, pleaded to be let go. Like most Oscar-worthy performances by Black actors, it failed to sway my white audience. Chafed wrists handcuffed behind my back, I was hauled away in an unmarked mini-van like the one my mother used to drive us—me, my old sister Danielle, and younger brother James—to school in.

After I wipe the ink from my fingers, I'm escorted to a holding cell where a solitary Black woman paces up and down, mumbling to herself while making squiggly lines with her twiggy arms like a Baptist church choir conductor. A metal cacophony plays in the background: metal handcuffs clacking, metal doors clanking, metal pay phones slamming against metal cradles. I spread out my allotted blanket, one of those worn, thin fleece ones, across the cot closest to the entrance, use the pay phone in the corner. I call my roommate, then a friend from college when my roommate doesn't pick up. At the beep when you're instructed to say your name, I blurt, This-is-Jasmine-I-was-arrested-don't-tell-my-mother.

I lie on the cot and close my eyes, but they won't stay shut. The sounds of metal and my mother's disappointment fill my mind. I sit up and people-watch. My eyes land on the four women different shades of brown in the diagonal cell. They're standing with their bodies pressed against the metal, hands clenching bars the size of arms. Short skirts, ripped stockings, stilettos that shone in the light. Like a scene from a movie. *They*, I think, *they have to do this*.

July 25, 2014. A few hours until my mother's 54th birthday. We—me, my mother, and her older sister, my Aunt Tonya—sat in the backyard of my childhood home listening to the old school jams streaming from a neighbor's yard. The sounds of Maze and Frankie Beverly mingling with the smell of smoke and barbecue sauce.

I was half-listening to my mother as she talked at me about my reckless behavior and disregard of authority, which, according to her, we should have seen coming considering I'd been

complaining about teachers talking down to me since elementary school. We were sitting directly across from each other, our bodies separated by the O-shaped patio table holding our ashy elbows and apple martinis. Aunt Tonya, my mother's older sister, was slumped in a chair beside me, sipping on tequila from a UPenn shot glass—something tangible to show for all my years of schooling.

In less than five minutes, our conversation had shifted from my little cousin's music lessons to how none of us could believe my grandmother was really dead, to the writing retreat I'd just come from, and the essay I'd just written about a weekend music festival of mud, drugs, and Kendrick Lamar, to my mother worrying that I'd someday end up in jail.

Never failed.

No matter how conversations with my mother began, they always seemed to end with her worrying about me and, let her tell it, how I was constantly taking years off her life between my Facebook rants about my racist PhD program, blog posts with titles like Fuck the Police, and my drug use, which in itself was bad enough, but did I have to publicize it?

I was irritated with my mother, then irritated with myself for being irritated. I was well aware that to be a Black mother in America is to live in a permanent state of premature mourning, to exist with the constant gnawing fear that at any moment, any phone call, any bulletin flashed across a computer or television screen might be news of loss. It had been exactly a week since Eric Garner said his last three words—I can't breathe—as he suffocated at the hands of police just thirty miles from where we sat.

I'm serious, my mother said, holding her apple martini in one hand and a Newport in the other. I'm scared for you.

Aunt Tonya leaned in on the Plexiglas, poured herself another double shot of Jose Cuervo. I said nothing, looked down at my empty martini glass, thoughts of the night of my arrest reflecting back at me like a distorted mirror.

I alternated feeling guilty and trying to appease the guilt. *Should I just say it? Does she already know? Did she bring up jail just to get me to confess to what she'd already found out? Nah, there's no way she knows. She would've def said something by now. I can't ruin her*

birthday. We didn't even cut the cake yet. The wondering alone made me more anxious. It was as though I could feel the shame churning away inside me, like some indigestible food awaiting evacuation.

Your sister was just saying she worries about you too, my mother continued. You better be careful. She took a long drag of her cigarette.

You don't have to worry about me, I said, trying for a casual, playful tone. I'm too pretty for jail anyway. I heard Aunt Tonya and my mother laugh, but I didn't look up. Didn't want to chance bumping into a truth I wasn't yet ready to see, or worse, that look of resigned acceptance my mother wore sometimes like a bruise she was tired of hiding. Even when she was silent, you could feel her presence like a great fatigue. They laughed and talked. I did what I normally do when unable to speak, used silence as my protection, jotted notes in my phone while telling myself I'd use them later.

Do you mind starting from the beginning? said the overpriced attorney I'd found on the Internet. Why were you in LA? How did you end up working at this gym? Didn't you know what you were doing was illegal? His voice sounded full of accusation.

It was two days after the arrest. We were sitting in his West Hollywood office overlooking Sunset Strip. Through the windows, I could see a glimmer of Sunset Strip, flamboyant billboards mounted on steel frames, lackluster overpriced hotels, hipster dive bars. I sat upright with my hands in my lap and my ankles hooked onto one another, shackled to myself. I tried to speak in a straightforward manner, little emotion. I told the lawyer that I'd moved to LA after I graduated from college and had been taking on odd jobs to pay my bills. I told him that I'd responded to a Craigslist ad in January seeking body rub girls. I told him that after six weeks of making decent money (about \$600-800 a week) at the Office—what we all called the four-room massage studio—and listening to the other girls talk about how much more money we'd be making if we were in a better location (meaning whiter), and having potential clients tell me that they wanted to

come in but it was too long of a drive, I applied for another massage position at a gym in Century City. The other side of the color line. Gated communities and manicured lawns, pastel-colored stucco mansions, glass movie studio towers, private security cars driving down private palm tree-lined streets.

What I didn't tell him was that I didn't actually think I'd get it considering most places didn't hire Black women, especially not Black women as dark as me. I'd applied to other places. Most people didn't return my calls, said they were no longer hiring though they'd just posted a help-wanted ad. One owner said he'd hire me on a trial basis but only if he could lighten my photos. Others were more explicit in their racism, wrote in their ads disclaimers like NO BLACK WOMEN NEEDED and WHITE AND LIGHT SKIN LATINAS ONLY. But the owner of the gym was Ukrainian and had a better understanding of race, desire, and the market than most Americans. He said that me being Black might actually be an asset since there weren't any other Black women nearby. He placed advertisements for me online for \$150 massages. He took \$50 and I kept the other \$100 and whatever tips they gave me. I made over \$500 my first day.

The lawyer stopped taking notes and took a dramatic pause. He looked up at me, gave me a long stare as though sizing me up, deciding just how good of a performer I was. I didn't know how to tell him that it wasn't that I was necessarily lying, more that I no longer knew how to tell if the things coming out of my mouth were the truth.

I thought for a moment and then told him it was all temporary, just something to pay the bills until I started a Ph.D. program at the University of Pennsylvania, which I'd gotten into just three days before the arrest. I didn't mention that I thought the whole ordeal was like karma, punishment for failing to observe the unwritten color lines, trespassing into the forbidden white space. The price I had to pay for being Black and taking on white entitlement. In America, that made me greedy, senseless even, in need of being reminded of my place. Looking back, maybe I could've pleaded insanity if I'd told him that. If I'd just been satisfied and made it work like everyone else at the Office or gotten a corporate job like the rest of my classmates, maybe none of this would have happened.

But it wasn't really greed that led me to the job, more like exhaustion. I was tired of

having to be twice as good and half as Black, of expecting half of what I deserved. I was just as pretty and more intelligent (in terms of book smarts, that is, which I was learning was not enough) as the unlicensed white masseuses in Beverly Hills and Calabasas. I deserved what they had, which was what I'd told myself when I looked for another position.

He told me to send him an email with a brief biography and copies of my transcripts and graduate school acceptance letter, proof that I could not be a prostitute.

Bio: Twenty-two years old, daughter of a court stenographer and real estate accountant (legitimizing term for East Coast slumlord), the granddaughter of cotton-pickers, the great granddaughter of slaves. Born and raised on Long Island, New York. Graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's English submatriculation program with a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and master's degree in English. Future Penn PhD.

It worked for the most part. The three charges—a felony prostitution charge and two misdemeanors for solicitation and practicing without a license—were reduced to a single misdemeanor for practicing without a license, which could be expunged, a year's probation, thirty hours of community service, and a rapid HIV test.

My mother poured herself another drink. I went inside to change into my home uniform—a UPenn hoodie, cotton shorts, and my worn chestnut Uggs—and grab my mother's birthday gift, a newspaper-wrapped painting of a beautiful dark-skinned woman in a bright, patterned dress, shades of purple and yellow and green enclosed in a thick gold frame. I'd bought it from a mom-and-pop art gallery that morning while shopping in downtown Saratoga Springs with a few girls from the writing retreat.

Here comes Gabby, my mother said when I walked back onto the deck. What she said every time I put on my uniform.

Huh? Aunt Tonya said.

She's talking about Gabrielle Union, I said. Being Mary Jane.

Mommy explained that Gabrielle Union always wore short shorts and Uggs on the show. The girl even vacuums in 'em, she said, laughing.

Yup, I said, and I love it.

The last time I was home I'd watched an episode of Being Mary Jane with my mother and older sister, Danielle. My mother called Mary Jane a slut for sleeping around, said she had sex with a different man every episode. It had only been two men and there were only eight episodes in the season, but she wasn't trying to hear that. We were, after all, talking about a woman who'd had sex with one man her entire life, her ex-husband, my father.

My sister Danielle agreed. Mary Jane was always sleeping around. She could be worse than a parent sometimes, more judgmental, more condescending. My sister, the daughter with the economics degree and finance job. The daughter who follows the rules, wears pearl necklace and bracelet sets, doesn't sleep around, who agrees with our mother that both Mary Jane and Olivia Pope are sluts.

Listening to the two of them talk, literally slut-shame, I wondered if they had a word for what they'd call me if they knew what and whom I'd done.

Fortunately for my self-esteem, I was finally reaching the point where I could understand their beliefs without necessarily agreeing with them. I'd spent most of grad school reading books on Black women's sexuality and the history of our oppression, the politics of respectability—the self-imposed code of conduct Black people have been following for over a century in an attempt to make white people see us as human—al of which helped me to realize that at the root of all our discussions, or rather our lack of discussions, was a long history of silence and repression.²¹ Unspeakable things unspoken.²² We were descendants of a culture of dissemblance, I learned, the self-imposed silence Black women developed around their sexualities and desires in the nineteenth-century to counter all the negative stereotypes used by white slave masters to justify our rape. It can't be rape if she wanted it.²³

Instead of saying any of this to them, I just lay on the end of my mother's bed smiling,

happy for Mary Jane and her sexual freedom, no matter how fleeting or fictitious it may have been.

I handed my mother her gift, watched her as she opened it. Even with her hair barely combed, pushed back into a long, fuzzy ponytail, she was even more stunning than the woman in the painting. Her mahogany face glistened underneath the patio like Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky. I was starting to look more and more like her, had her clear brown skin, naturally pouty lips, long, never-ending legs.

Ohh, Jas, she said, it's absolutely beautiful. Aunt Tonya agreed. Mommy stood up, walked over to me, and gave me one of those hugs. You know those hugs. The ones that make you feel special, like it was meant only for you.

I considered telling her what the other gift option had been, but decided against it. Didn't want to shorten her motherly fulfillment, which could just as easily turn to feelings of parental failure. One of the girls from the retreat had suggested I get her a sex toy. She said she'd gotten matching vibrators for her and her mother a few years back. I couldn't believe there were Black people who did shit like that. When I told her that wasn't an option, she asked if my mother and I were close. I said we were. It was the truth.

Though we never said it out loud, my mother and I had long ago acknowledged that we shared a special bond, a sort of core kinship different from what she had with my sister and brother. Twenty-something years later and I was slowly beginning to realize that this closeness entangled us in ways that would shape me for the rest of my life.

What I didn't tell the girls was that in spite of our closeness—or maybe because of it—we were distant. We never talked about sex. Never had the big talk, no mention of birds or bees, of something, anything to look forward to. Like all the other Black girls I knew, I was never taught a language to express my confusions and desires, and like many of them, I'd unconsciously grown to equate sex with silence.

The closest we'd ever come to any sort of talk, I was a junior in high school. I'd just come home from tennis practice and opened the door to my mother dashing down the stairs, a look of disgust on her face. She'd just finished watching this highly publicized Oprah special on the oral

sex epidemic plaguing America's suburbs, schools, and school busses.

Oh my God, I remember her saying. Did you know about this? How could anyone put that in their mouth? He has to pee with that! I just looked at her, saying nothing, my way of letting her hold on to whatever image she had of me. At least I'd never done it on a school bus, I thought.

I was back at the Office two days after my meeting with the lawyer, massaging my way through lawyer and court fees. The Office felt like a cage, the world's way of reminding me that I was back where I belonged, that no matter how far I ran, the cuffs were never far behind, the metal bars, invisible red lines still existing. Clients started complaining to Rhonda about my massages, said I was gipping them on their time. Eva and Veronica said I seemed different, out of it. I didn't tell any of them what had happened. I was too afraid that I'd get fired, considered a liability, and really have nowhere else to go.

Other hours were spent at a thrift store in West Hollywood performing mandated community service, tagging used clothes, reorganizing racks, windexing shelves, over-using the hand sanitizer. There were usually three or four other petty criminals working a shift. Mostly DUI and shoplifting offenders allowed to opt-out of picking up trash along the highway. I wouldn't tell them what I was in for. She must be a murderer, one of them said.

A week before moving back East, I went to the free clinic on Beverly for my rapid HIV test. The waiting was at capacity, each seat and the back wall filled with mostly Latinos. I barely heard any English. I signed the sheet for rapid HIV tests and waited on the steps in the hallway, away from the crowd, until my name was called.

Don't worry, the twenty-something dirty blonde volunteer said once he sat me in his office. You don't have anything to worry about. Here we go again, I thought, thinking you know me. Was it not true that HIV has no face, that anyone can be affected? The volunteer never asked what brought me in, so I never told. I just listened to the blond haired, 20-something-year-

old recite tips on safe sex and make jokes about sticking to oral when you're paranoid while we waited for the results.

I appeared in court a few days later to inform the judge of the test results and completed community service. The Airport Courthouse was a mile from the Office, in the southwest corner of the San Diego Freeway interchange, the courtroom pews filled with fifty or sixty other Black and Latino bodies.

When my name was called, I walked up to the podium. I could feel at least fifty pairs of eyes following me, burning holes through my wrinkled H&M cardigan, frowning faces transforming into amusement.

Do you have the result of your HIV test? the judge said. I glanced over at the Black court officer leaning against the side door with his arms crossed, felt him passing sentence.

Yes, I said.

And what are they? the judge asked as if there were more than one possibility.

Negative, I said.

He rambled on about probation and making it up to the state of California and something about me getting lucky, but all I heard was you are nothing you are nothing you are nothing.

I'd been belittled by clients, employers, teachers, peers, cops. I'd been taunted, broke, hungry, hit, silenced, and still I'd never felt as pathetic and worthless as I felt in front of that judge. I'd walked in almost human and left a statistic, made part of the centuries-old prostitution politics that equated women in the commercial sex industry with disease, vice, and immorality. I held in the tears, determined not to let him see me cry.

My mother handed me two paint swabs—one brown, one orange—asked which color I liked more. She was proud of her deck, excited to finally get it stained. I teased her for being so indecisive. The conversation then turned to how kids from my generation don't understand the significance of owning a home in Lakeview.

In the 60s, when both of my parents' families moved to the neighborhood, they were met with invisible red lines, signs that read NEGROES! This Community could become another GHETTO. You owe it to YOUR "FAMILY" TO BUY in another COMMUNITY, daily reminders that no matter where they went, the American Dream would never be their reality. Black folk in Lakeview worked hard, I would learn from my mother and the Facebook posts by one of her old classmates that she'd share with me, my brother, and sister. They held marches, protests, fought to integrate the nearby school district—from which my parents, aunts and uncles, brother, sister, and I would graduate.

My mother was right. I didn't fully understand any of this growing up, the importance of owning something after centuries of being considered property. I hadn't yet obtained the books that explained the history left out of class discussions, didn't fully appreciate all of my mother's hard work and perseverance, the unpaid and unacknowledged labor and love that went into not only making our home a place that was beautiful and safe but our lives feel like something worth living.

My mother was part of a long lineage of self-sacrificing Black mothers, which included generations of slave women who struggled to keep their children, my grandmother I didn't want to let her down.

Which one do you like? I said. She was leaning toward the orange. I agreed. She took a drag off her cigarette. I watched the smoke leave her mouth, shroud her face like a cloud. Aunt Tonya circled back to the writing retreat, asked how it was, how my writing was developing. I said it was okay, that I made a few writer friends. What I didn't tell her was that I'd applied to the retreat to work on my dissertation, but spent the whole time writing about death and drugs and my grandmother. I'd convinced myself it was a way of healing, words a way of trying to write out of the darkness. But the truth was it was also a way to deflect, to shift my focus away from reckoning with my research, my shame. Writing it down made it real. I wasn't ready. Junot Diaz said that in order to write the book you want to write, in the end you have to become the person you need to become to write that book. I had to become that person.

Ohh, that sounds nice, Aunt Tonya said. Was this part of that Ford thing you posted on

Facebook?

It wasn't. I'd just been awarded a prestigious dissertation fellowship by the Ford Foundation, a year's stipend to read, write, and work on my dissertation. I was always winning something, my attempt at compensating for feelings of lack. I had the CV of a promising scholar, pages of competitions won, classes taught, conference presentations given, essays and blog posts published. I'd started blogging during lectures, about issues affecting Black girls and women, my way of trying to feel like I was actually doing something, of trying to block the thoughts of inferiority, fears of being exposed as a fraud. *Why am I not like them? Why don't I enjoy this? Why am I so miserable?*

The technical term is imposter syndrome. Intellectual self-doubt among high achievers, especially common in minorities. Unable to internalize and accept our success, we attribute our accomplishments to luck rather than merit, while living with the constant fear that others will eventually unmask us as frauds, that our efforts will never be enough.

I thought grad school might save me, make me into the respectable person I was meant to be. A few weeks before arriving on campus, I learned that we wouldn't receive our first stipend checks until the end of the month. I'd have to come up with first, last, and security deposit for an apartment on my own. I turned to Craigslist. Within hours, I found a one-month sublet near campus for \$450 along with a used massage table in the sales section.

While my peers were at new student orientation, I was driving to the outskirts of Philly to pick up the massage table, setting it up in my sublet, and posting a body rub ad online. By the end of the month, I'd have enough money to sign a one-year lease for my own one bedroom apartment. I'd also end up massaging from each of my apartments for three years to supplement my stipend, my attempt at making it above the poverty line. I alternated classes and massage appointments in my living room. Went almost the entire first year with clients being my only guests.

I was the only Black person in my cohort, one of three in the entire school. The girl in Black leggings and pink lipstick in a sea of khaki. The other students, mostly white and Asian, had been preparing for PhD programs since they were undergrads, some had academia in their blood, generations of professors in their families. The smartest person I knew, my grandmother, only had a fourth-grade education, and I'd only applied to the program after a friend told me I could get paid to read and write, and why not since I wasn't doing anything productive anyway. I had a creative writing degree, a bookshelf of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Junot Diaz. Fortunately clients didn't mind my bookshelf or lack of familiarity with Deleuze and Guattari. They were more interested in clearing their minds of their wives, jobs, daily obligations. Small talk and hand jobs. A performance I could pull off more easily than PhD student.

In class, I cultivated a new persona, perfected the art of becoming visibly invisible. I sat silently, blogged and tweeted on my laptop as students and professors chatted in the background about communication theories that didn't apply to me. While the rest of my classmates fretted about conferences and papers and teaching summer classes, I doubled up on coursework, spent my free time writing and reading whatever books I could find written by and about Black women.

After reading women like Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde, I decided to write my dissertation on the Office, to get back in contact with the truths I hadn't been ready to see, all the ones omitted from most of the books, articles, memoirs, movies, and news reports on the commercial sex industry. I started going to LA during winter, summer, and fall breaks, alternated massaging and interviewing the girls and clients. What some anthropologists might call going native.²⁴

You're different, I remember Veronica saying the first time I returned to the Office after my first year of grad school. She said I seemed more mature. She was right. In retrospect, I was growing into consciousness. I hadn't realized how naïve I'd been just a year before, how little I knew. Writers like John Edgar Wideman, James Baldwin, Angelou, Lorde, Kiese Laymon were forcing me to open my eyes, to resist the too common American urge to cling to comfortable narratives. Grad school was becoming the final stage of my red-black-and-green phase that a lot of Black people go through, as we learn all the history excluded from public school textbooks and

college lectures. It was as though a veil had been lifted from my eyes. I understood what James Baldwin meant when he wrote, *To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.*

I spent hours at the Office that day talking to Veronica, Eva, and Alice, laughing, catching up, telling them about massaging out of my apartment. School barely came up. I didn't realize it but I needed the outlet, the ears to listen and the mouths to reply. Back at school I started reading ethnographies, studies on different cultures and people. All of the work on sex work—what the middle-class white women were calling the exchange of cash for sexual services—was on white women or migrants from third world countries. The few things on Black women were about streetwalkers and HIV. Little on the hierarchies in the industry, issues of race, sensual massage. Nothing on Eva, Veronica, Rhonda, or Alice. Nothing on me. I complained to my advisor one day about my classes, the books I was reading, the fact that people were always speaking in a code I had no interest in learning how to break. He handed me a performance studies journal with stories, poems, and essays written by professors and graduate students. You can do what you want, he said, and still be an academic.

Six months after the night on the deck, I went back to LA for a few months. I told myself that I wouldn't leave until I finished my dissertation. I ended up conducting interviews and observing while working part-time at the Office with Alice and a new girl named Tiffani, a forty-ish masseuse, escort, and former streetwalker.

A few times a week, I'd go to a writing workshop in West Hollywood. I'd signed up for the class after browsing the instructor's website. Her motto: *relax, become present, and listen inside to the story that wants to be told.* I arrived the first day to four or five writers—twenties, thirties, fifties, new writers, published authors, a stay-at-home—scattered around the bohemian living room of our instructor Elana, an eccentric writing counselor and spiritual healer from the Ukraine. When she opened the door, she asked that I take off my shoes. Leave all that negative energy at

the door, she'd said. We started with introductions. When it was my turn, I explained that I was a grad student working on my dissertation and that I'd come to the workshop hoping for some inspiration, a reminder of why I started writing it in the first place. I wanted to write something that was both critical and creative, assessable, Black.

After a short meditation, Elana read a passage from a book on unleashing your creativity. Then she told us to write whatever was on our mind. I wrote about Eva's thirtieth birthday party and how nice it felt to feel like I belonged. Then I wrote about Milly, the Latina girl whose apartment I was subletting. I found out that she also did sensual massage and BDSM, and we ended up the apartment for appointments. When I read my work out loud, the other writers in the room commended me on my command of literature, praised my ability to show the women with such compassion. After lunch, Elana asked why I wasn't writing about myself. I told her I wasn't interested in the first-person, that I wanted to tell multiple stories. I could tell from her face that she wasn't buying my response, so I added that I was also dealing with the burden of representation, the voice in the back of my mind reminding me every time I sat down in front of the blank page that just as my achievements would advance the race, my failures would hinder it. There were also actual voices, those of my mother and the Black women professors who'd urged me to write from the objective point of view, to leave myself out as much as possible. It's hard enough as a Black woman in academia, they'd said, why make it more difficult for yourself?

In the New Yorker essay "Trading Stories," writer Jhumpa Lahiri reflects on her childhood and her parents' inability to understand her choice to become a writer. She says that in order to tell stories, she had to learn to both look and listen and be deaf and blind. I had not yet developed the gift of being deaf and blind.²⁵ Elana told me to stop hiding behind other people's stories. Just try for the next hour, she said. Write whatever comes to mind. You don't have to read it out loud. No one ever has to see it.

When everyone else picked up their pens, I sat staring at the white space and blue lines of the notebook paper in my lap. I thought about the arrest, that night on the deck the night before my mother's birthday, the shame, and most of all, those four women from that diagonal cell. Strapped with so many feelings, I finally wrote:

They have to do this. Who is they? What is this? In my mind, I knew those four women in that adjacent cell. When they looked at me, I looked away. I was afraid they might see me judging them. I was afraid to admit that to have really looked at them, to have seen them would have been to admit that I was looking at a reflection of myself.

Elana started the next class by reading a folktale about a priest and prostitute who live next door to each other. Each day the priest sits in his doorway, reciting the Gita, a sacred Hindu text, as he watches the prostitute tend to her business, quietly judging her lowly ways. The two die on the same day. Heaven's messengers come to deliver the prostitute while Hell's messengers come for the priest. The priest, angry and confused, demands an explanation. The messengers tell him that while he was busy judging the prostitute, she was listening to him recite the Gita and praying that she could one day elevate herself to his position, and in this way, the prostitute had achieved liberation while he only degraded himself.

When Elana was finished reading, she closed the book, looked me in my wet eyes, and said, Never be ashamed.

CONCLUSION

*Touch is a signal in the communication process that, above all other communication channels, most directly and immediately escalates the balance of intimacy.*¹

— STEPHEN THAYER

According to Black queer sociologist Cathy Cohen, the so-called “deviant” practices and behaviors of the marginalized offer the potential for resistance. When “deviant groups” fight for “basic human goals of pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect,” they open up and mobilize a queer politics of dissent with prevailing norms that deny the value of their lives.² Like Cohen, Ariane Cruz argues for the queer political potential in deviant acts, theorizing a “politics of perversion” that sees sexual pleasure as a subversive force.³ In *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*, an exploration of Black women's representations and performances within American pornography and BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism) from the 1930s to present-day, Cruz argues that BDSM is a productive space from which to consider the complexity and diverseness of Black women's sexual practice and the mutability of Black sexuality and reveals the ways in which these women illustrate a complex and contradictory negotiation of pain, pleasure, and power.

Similarly, in *Touching Paranoia*, I have put forth the massage parlor a productive space to recuperate the voices, stories, and experiences of those deemed deviant and witness “the power of those at the bottom, whose everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, the basic normative assumptions of a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of some normal and natural order of life.”⁴ It is this conceptualization of the massage parlor as epistemological terrain that space also emerges for the exploration of the erotic and touch—“one of the most neglected modalities of communication”⁵—as potential sites to explore the possibilities that lie buried in the intimate encounters of our mundane lives.

In her book *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland writes about the relationship between race, racism, and desire, specifically how the legacy of slavery continues to affect our everyday practices and the personal and political dimensions of our erotic lives. She

touches on the erotic and spatial elements of racism, how slavery and segregation worked to separate bodies from interacting and touching out of fear of interracial sex and the tainting of the pure white race. In our world of differences, distance, and misunderstandings, Holland offers touch as both a violation and potential site of transformation. Touch, she writes, “can alter the very idea as well as the actuality of relationships, morphing friends into enemies and strangers into intimates. For touch can encompass empathy as well as violation, passivity as well as active aggression. It can be safely dangerous, or dangerously safe. It also carries a message about the immediate present, the possible future, and the problematic past. Finally, touch crosses boundaries, in fact and imagination.”⁶

ENDNOTES

NOTES FROM INTRODUCTION

I. SING A BLACK GIRL'S SONG: A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO THE COMMERCIAL SEX INDUSTRY

- ¹ Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 1.
- ² Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1994), 4.
- ³ "The Client List," IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1625340/>.
- ⁴ Eric Laneuville, director, *The Client List* (North Vancouver, Canada: Bauman Entertainment, Jaffe/Braunstein Films, Wintergreen Productions, 2010), DVD. For more information about the actual scandal, see David J. Lee, "61 Arrested In Healing Touch Case," *Odessa American* (June 28, 2004), http://www.oaoa.com/news/article_2689254d-55c4-5947-b680-5580461abdb7.html; Katy Vine, "'She Had Brains, a Body, and the Ability to Make Men Love Her,'" *Texas Monthly* (January 2005), <http://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/she-had-brains-a-body-and-the-ability-to-make-men-love-her/>.
- ⁵ I use the terms commercial sex, prostitution, and sex work interchangeably to refer to the practice of exchanging sexual services for some form of compensation, normally money. In the late 1970s, Carol Leigh (also known as Scarlot Harlot) coined the term "sex work"—an umbrella term that includes "anyone who exchanges money, goods, or services for their erotic or sexual labor"—as a means to best describe the labor she and other workers in the commercial sex industry performed in an effort to unite workers, provide an alternative to stigmatized language, and "acknowledg[e] the work we do rather than defin[e] us by our status." This includes porn performers, fetish workers, phone sex operators, streetwalkers, high-end escorts, erotic masseuses, exotic dancers, and others. See Carol Leigh, "Inventing Sex Work," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 203; Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray, eds., *Spread: The Best of the Magazine That Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution*, (New York: Feminist Press, 2015), 11–12.
- ⁶ Lesley Goldberg, "Lifetime Orders Jennifer Love Hewitt's 'The Client List' To Series," *Hollywood Reporter* (Aug. 10, 2011), <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/lifetime-orders-jennifer-love-hewitts-221494>.
- ⁷ Ken Tucker, "'The Client List' Review: Jennifer Love Hewitt Shook Her Money-Maker", *Entertainment Weekly* (July 19, 2010), <http://watching-tv.ew.com/2010/07/19/client-list-jennifer-love-hewitt/>.
- ⁸ For more information on representations of the prostitute image, particularly the fallen woman, see Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls And Painted Faces: The Rhetoric Of Fallenness In Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993); George Watt, *The Fallen Woman In The Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Gretchen Huey Barnhill, "Fallen Angels: Female Wrongdoing In Victorian Novels," Thesis (University Of Lethbridge, 2005); Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison: UW Press, 2006).
- ⁹ Roxane Gay, "The (a)Morality of Tyler Perry" (August 17, 2013), <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/48219504684/the-amorality-of-tyler-perry>.
- ¹⁰ See Naomi McCormick, *Sexual Salvation: Affirming Women's Sexual Rights and Pleasures* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

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- ¹¹ US PROStitutes Collective (US PROS), "Sex Workers Join Mothers March" (April 18, 2001), <http://www.globalwomenstrike.net/content/sex-workers-take-streets-with-mothers-march> ("Over 70% of prostitute women are mothers, mostly single mothers, doing what we can to survive and give our children a better chance in life. We are also grandmothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, partners . . . supporting families and whole communities.")
- ¹² Elihu Rosenblatt, *Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 1996). ("Numerous studies have indicated that women of color, Black women in particular, are, when compared with white women, over-arrested, over-indicted, under-defended, and over-sentenced. African-American women are seven times for likely to be arrested for prostitution than women of other ethnic groups.")
- Note that I use African American and Black interchangeably in referring to the multiple identities, experiences, and cultures of Americans of African descent. I use white to refer to those of European/Anglo descent.
- ¹³ For more on "white slavery," see Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. For more on the "black side of white slavery," see S. W. Layten, "Northern Phase of a Southern Problem," *AME Church Review*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (March 1910): 315, 324.
- ¹⁴ Roberta Perkins, quoted in Jeffrey R. Young, "Commodification of Sexual Labor: The Contribution of Internet Communities to Prostitution Reform," PhD dissertation (Florida Atlantic University, 2009), 15. Originally appears in Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy, *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia* (Crowley: Western Australia UP, 2007), 10.
- ¹⁵ Joyce Eng, "Lifetime Renews The Client List," *TVGuide.com* (May 7, 2012), <http://www.tvguide.com/news/lifetime-renews-client-list-1047031/>.
- ¹⁶ Mike Hale, "Idle Hands in Need of Work: 'The Client List' with Jennifer Love Hewitt on Lifetime," *New York Times* (April 6, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/07/arts/television/the-client-list-with-jennifer-love-hewitt-on-lifetime.html>.
- ¹⁷ Ann Lowry Weir, "Courtesans and Prostitutes in South Asian Literature," in *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature*, edited by Pierre L. Horn and Mary Beth Pringle (New York, Frederick Ungar, 1984), 87.
- ¹⁸ Melissa Farley, quoted in "Getting Real Facts About Prostitution: An Interview with Melissa Farley," *Merge* (1998), www.mergemag.org/1998/farley.html.
- ¹⁹ See "The Emotional Labor of Sex," in Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (Routledge: New York, 1997): 69-96.
- ²⁰ Hale, *supra* note 15.
- ²¹ Mireille Miller-Young, "Pornography Can Be Empowering to Women on Screen," *New York Times*, June 10, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/11/11/does-pornography-deserve-its-bad-rap/pornography-can-be-empowering-to-women-on-screen>.
- ²² Tracy Abernathy, quoted in "Black Women and Prostitution," *Gauntlet Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 7, Prostitution Special: In Defense of Prostitution, edited by Carol Leigh (1994).
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 46.
- ²⁵ Anonymous woman, quoted in "Black Women and Prostitution," *Gauntlet Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 7, Prostitution Special: In Defense of Prostitution, edited by Carol Leigh (1994).
- ²⁶ Heather Berg, "Working for Love, Loving for Work: Discourses of Labor in Feminist Sex-Work Activism," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014), 701.
- ²⁷ Mireille Miller-Young, "A Taste for Brown Sugar: The History of Black Women in American Pornography," PhD dissertation (New York University, 2004), 7.
- ²⁸ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ²⁹ PBS, "What is Gentrification?" *POV* (2003), <http://www.pbs.org/pov/flagwars/what-is-gentrification/>.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 103

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- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 270, 272.
- ³⁴ Mireille Miller-Young's work includes: *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014); "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography," *Sexualities*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2010), 219-235; "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography," *Meridians*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Jan. 2007), 261-292; "Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks: Black Women in 1980s Video Pornography," In *Blackness and Sexualities*, edited by Michelle Wright and Antje Schuhmann (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2007), 143-164.
- ³⁵ Siobhan Brooks, *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).
- ³⁶ Cynthia M. Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-Of-The-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.
- ³⁷ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1994).
- ³⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1989), 912-920.
- ³⁹ Tricia Rose, *Longing To Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality & Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), ix.
- ⁴⁰ Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 20.
- ⁴¹ Evelynnn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (1994), 131.
- ⁴² Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ⁴³ Mireille Miller-Young, "Can the ho's speak? Black sex workers and the politics of deviance, defiance and desire,"
- ⁴⁴ Mireille Miller-Young, "A Taste for Brown Sugar: The History of Black Women in American Pornography," PhD dissertation (New York University, 2004), 7.
- ⁴⁵ Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 9.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., at 31.
- ⁴⁸ Samantha Elena Erskine, "Slavery's Echo in the Lives of Black Erotic Laborers: Racism, Stigma, and the Politics of Respectability," Thesis (Ann Arbor: Sarah Lawrence College, 2007), 16.
- ⁴⁹ John L. Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 86.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., at 91.
- ⁵² Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 55.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004), 709.
- ⁵⁵ Supra note 52.
- ⁵⁶ Roderick A. Ferguson, "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic,'" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3/4 (Fall 2012), 301.
- ⁵⁷ Supra note 38, at viii.
- ⁵⁸ Supra note 45, at 302.
- ⁵⁹ Caroline Brown, "Golden Gray and the Talking Book: Identity as a Site of Artful Construction in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Whiter 2002), 629.

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- ⁶⁰ On erotic capital, see Adam Green, "The Social Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2008): 25-50. For more on the relationship between erotic capital and hierarchies in the sex industry, see Chapter 2 of Siobhan Brooks, *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010).
- ⁶¹ Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (New York: Polity, 2000), 1.
- ⁶² Laura Agustin, "New Research Directions: The Cultural Studies of Commercial Sex," *Sexualities*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2005), 619.
- ⁶³ Kamala Kempadoo, "Women of Color and the Global Sex Trade: Transnational Feminist Perspectives," *Meridians*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2001), 28.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, at 37.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, at 43.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, at 40.
- ⁶⁷ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory on the Politics of Sexuality," In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 275.
- ⁶⁸ Intersectionality is Kimberlé Crenshaw's term describing the ways that race, gender, sexuality, class, and various other social categories of difference intersect to constitute subjects' senses of identity and oppression. See Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *After Identity: A Reader in Law and Culture*, edited by Dan Danielsen and Karen Engle (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 337.
- ⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon, translated by Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1965 [1961]), 32.
- ⁷⁰ For further discussion of these battles, see Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); and Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- ⁷¹ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 59.
- ⁷² *Supra* note 60.
- ⁷³ Jennifer C. Nash explores the relationship between antipornography feminism and Black feminism in "Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism," *Social Text*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2008): 51-76; and Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). For more about the vexed relationship between Black feminist scholarship and pornography, see Ariane Cruz, "Pornography: A Black Feminist Woman Scholar's Reconciliation," in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, edited by Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, and Mireille Miller-Young (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013), 215-27.
- ⁷⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 174.
- ⁷⁵ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (Routledge: New York, 1997): 23.
- ⁷⁶ Danielle Egan, *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love: The Relationships between Exotic Dancers and Their Regulars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
- ⁷⁷ Vicky Funari, quoted in *Sex-Trafficking, Human Rights, and Social Justice*, edited by Tiantian Zheng (London: Routledge, 2010), 29.
- ⁷⁸ Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 102.
- ⁷⁹ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Karl Marx Early Writings*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregory Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 350.

- ⁸⁰ Alison M. Jaggar, *Living With Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 106.
- ⁸¹ Cynthia Cole Robinson, *From the Classroom to the Corner: Female Dropouts' Reflections on Their School Years* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 26.
- ⁸² Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," also known as the "Combahee River Collective Statement," printed in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 232.

II. BLACK FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS FIXING METHODOLOGY IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

- ¹ Barbara Christian, "Fixing Methodologies: Beloved," *Culture Critique*, Vol. 24 (Spring 1993), 11-14,
- ² Discussed further in Barbara Christian, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*, edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
- ³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 221.
- ⁴ Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001), 66.
- ⁵ Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, and Personal Reflexivity," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 740.
- ⁶ Robin Boylorn, quoted in "Black Feminist Auto/Ethnography That Makes You Want To Cry," *Insight News* (June 20, 2012), <http://www.insightnews.com/2012/06/20/black-feminist-autoethnography-that-makes-you-want-to-cry-2/>.
- ⁷ Ronald L. Jackson, II, "Exploring African American Identity Negotiation in the Academy: Toward a Transformative Vision of African American Communication Scholarship," in *African American Communication & Identities: Essential Readings* (New York: SAGE, 2004), 250.
- ⁸ Karen Tracy, *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 22.
- ⁹ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 9.
- ¹⁰ Supra note 5.
- ¹¹ Ibid., at 2.
- ¹² See Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader* (New York: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2001).
- ¹³ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2005).
- ¹⁴ H. L. Goodall, Jr., *Writing The New Ethnography* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2000), 21.
- ¹⁵ In "Staging Fieldwork/Performing Human Rights," In *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, edited by D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2006), Soyini Madison addresses the relationship between "positionality" and the audience, and discusses audience collaborations in performance ethnography as "enacting the rights of citizenship" because "to join in" is to "have your position heard, is to participate in society as a fully endowed citizen with both social and political rights" (343-344D). Dwight Conquergood, in "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1985), states that in a staged ethnography "each voice has its own integrity" (10).
- ¹⁶ Manthia Diawara, "Black Studies, Cultural Studies: Performative Arts," *Border/Lines: Canada's Magazine of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 30 (1993), 25.
- ¹⁷ D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158.

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- ¹⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy And The Politics Of Culture Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2003), 66.
- ¹⁹ Maggie O'Neill, *Prostitution and Feminism: Towards a Politics of Feeling* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 1956.
- ²⁰ Mari Matsuda (1991) views critical race theory as "the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination" (1331). In the article "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso elaborate on and expand work in critical race theory to include what they call critical race methodology. They define critical race methodology as "a theoretically grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. However, it also challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color;1 (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and (e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color." *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2002), 24.
- ²¹ The goals of CRF align very much with the goals of critical ethnography. According to philosopher and qualitative research methodologist Michael G. Gunzenhauser, critical ethnography is defined as the articulation of four promises: 1) giving voice; 2) uncovering power; 3) identifying agency; and 4) connecting analysis to cultural critique. he also suggests that researchers refine these existing promises and adopt two additional aims (self-reflexivity and nonexploitation) to "temper the original four promises and maintain a defensible ethnical commitment" ("Promising Rhetoric for Postcritical Ethnography," in *Postcritical Ethnography: Reinscribing Critique*, edited by George W. Noblit, Susana Y. Flores, and Enrique G. Murillo [Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2004], 78).
- ²² See Adrien K. Wing, ed., *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (New York: New York UP, 1997).
- ²³ McClaurin, *supra* note 84.
- ²⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (Oct.-Dec., 1986), S14.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, at S14-15.
- ²⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000 [1984]), vii.
- ²⁷ Collins, *supra* note 68, at S16.
- ²⁸ According to Karen O'Reilly, in "Going 'Native,'" in *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), the term "going native" refers to "the danger for ethnographers to become too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance" (87). While there are those that maintain that "going native," especially in the sex industry, jeopardizes the professional status of the researcher (Angie Hart, *Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological Reflections on Prostitution in Spain* [Oxford: Westview Press, 1998], 55), others have used complete participation as the key to the insider status. For example, Stephanie Wahab, in "Creating Knowledge Collaboratively with Female Sex Workers: Insights from a Qualitative, Feminist, and Participatory Study," *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 9, describes how she not only conducted observations in strip clubs but decided to engage in the sex work venue. Encouraged by her participants who insisted that to really understand the job it had to be lived, she took part in a peep show as a dancer, immersing herself in the context of the culture.
- ²⁹ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics And Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2005), 5.

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- ³⁰ Drawing on over a decade of research with women involved in prostitution, Maggie O'Neill, in "Researching Prostitution and Violence: Toward a Feminist Praxis," In *Women, Violence, and Male Power*, edited by Marianne Hester, Liz Kelly, and Jill Radford (London: Open University Press, 1996), argues that women should be "active participants in the social construction of knowledge," in order for their voices and stories to be heard (131). In *Prostitution and Feminism* (London: Polity Press, 2001), O'Neill sets out why researchers in this area need to move away from reinforcing the "binary thinking" about prostitution as either exploitation or choice but instead calls for research that "deconstructs the binaries and privilege constellational thinking" (87). Speaking from a critical human geography perspective, Phil Hubbard in "Researching Female Sex Work: Reflections on Geographical Exclusion, Critical Methodologies and 'Useful' Knowledge," *Area*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1999), Hubbard advocates the "emancipatory potential" of "action oriented and conversational research methodologies" that provide a voice to excluded populations.
- ³¹ Dan Rose, *Living The Ethnographic Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1990).
- ³² Douglas Foley and Angela Valenzuela, "Critical Ethnography: The Politics of Collaboration," In *The SAGE Handbook Of Qualitative Research*, 3rd Edition, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2005), 217.
- ³³ Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," In *Popular Culture: A Reader*, edited by Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 289.
- ³⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Penguin, 1970), xii-xiii.
- ³⁵ Julia O'Connell Davidson, *Children In The Global Sex Trade* (Malden and Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 149. (Quoted in Prabha Kotiswaran, *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2011], 30).

NOTES FROM ESSAYS & COMMENTARIES

I. POLITRICKING PERFORMING RACE, SEXUALITY, & RESPECTABILITY THROUGH LATE CAPITALISM

- ¹ "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography," *Sexualities*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2010), 221.
- ² "The politics of respectability" was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- ³ Initially introduced by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, emotional labor refers to "the management of feeling to create a publicly facial and bodily display." See Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 7. When applied to prostitution, emotional labor is often used in discussions of ways erotic laborers express and protect their emotions and emotional well-being. Sociologist Julia O'Connell Davidson, for example, writes that "the prostitute's skill and art lies in her ability to completely conceal all genuine feelings, beliefs, desires, preferences and personality (in short, her self) and appear as nothing more than the living embodiment of the client's fantasies."³ See Davidson, "Prostitution and the Contours of Control," in *Sexual Cultures: Communities, Values, and Intimacy*, edited by Janet Holland and Jeffrey Weeks (New York: Springer, 1996), 190.
- ⁴ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in her *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2012), 215.
- ⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 118.
- ⁶ Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Café* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 76.

II. TOUCH, DESIRE, AND RACIAL PARANOIA

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- ¹ Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2002), 24.
- ² Frantz Fanon, quoted in Tracie Church Guzzio, *All Stories Are True: History, Myth, and Trauma in the Work of John Edgar Wideman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 105.
- ³ Gil Scott-Heron, "King Alfred Plan," quoted in John L. Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
- ⁴ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory on the Politics of Sexuality," In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 293.
- ⁵ bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 39.
- ⁶ Michael Grossman, dir., *Grey's Anatomy*, Season 4, episode 9 "Crash Into Me: Part I," Nov. 22, 2007, American Broadcasting Company, Television series.
- ⁷ "Black people, to a degree that approaches paranoia, must be ever alert to danger from their white fellow citizens," write psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs in *Black Rage* (San Francisco: Basic Books, 1968). "It is a cultural phenomenon peculiar to black Americans. And it is a posture so close to paranoid thinking that the mental disorder into which black people most frequently fall is paranoid psychosis. Can we say that white men have driven black men mad?" In his 1957 essay "The Psychological Reaction Of Oppressed People" and 1940 novel *Native Son*, Richard Wright asserts that in the lives and minds of people oppressed by three centuries of American racism, the "reality of whiteness" has become a cosmic force that produces paranoid feelings of ontological dread and delusions of grand endangerment. Therefore, many Black men have strongly promulgated the notion of themselves as an "endangered species." ("The Psychological Reaction Of Oppressed People," in *White Man, Listen!*, [New York: Anchor Books, 1964]; *Native Son* [New York: Harper And Row, 1940]). See also John L. Jackson, Jr., *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), in which Jackson argues that racism has "gone underground" in the era of political correctness. As legal and overt forms of racism have been forced out of polite, educated society, Jackson argues, it has been largely internalized in a way that fosters mistrust and paranoia—on both sides of the color line—rather than honesty and openness.
- ⁸ Holland, *The Erotic Life Of Racism*, 100, 104.
- ⁹ Summary taken from Erin Aubry Kaplan, "Welcome to Inglewood—Leave Your Aspirations Behind," *LA Weekly*, July 21, 2005, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/welcome-to-inglewood-leave-your-aspirations-behind-2140330>.
- ¹⁰ Carl Van Vetchen, in his widely popular novel *Nigger Heaven* (New York: Knopf) documents slumming in Harlem, eroticizing the Black cultural hub "and its residents as once forbidden and lurid." (Quoted in Amy C. Steinbugler, *Beyond Loving: Intimate Racework in Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Interracial* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 5. Writing about New York City's restaurant scene, food critic George Chappell entices visitors with the following description in *Restaurants of New York* (New York: Greenberg, 1925), 119-120: "One of the New York evening pastimes is to observe the antics of members of its enormous Negro population, many of whom show great ability in song, dance, and comedy performance ... Their unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like, and graceful in their movements, combine to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds." See also Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Elizabeth Clement, "From Sociability to Spectacle: Interracial Sexuality and the Ideological Uses of Space in New York City, 1900-1930," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2005), 24-43.

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- ¹¹ bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, at 23
- ¹³ Julia O'Connell Davidson, in *Prostitution, Power and Freedom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998) defines "sex tourism" as a "term to describe the activities of individuals who...use their economic power to attain power of sexual command over local women, men and/or children while travelling for leisure purposes" (75). In "Fantasy Islands: Exploring the Demand for Sex Tourism," in *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*, edited by Kamala Kempadoo, O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor argue that sex tourism can be seen as Fantasy Islands where Western tourists go to experience their privileges. They argue that sex tourists "can reduce other human beings to nothing more than the living embodiments of masturbatory fantasies. In short, sex tourists can experience in real life a world very similar to that offered in fantasy to pornography users" (53).
- ¹⁴ Tariq Nasheed, in *The Mack Within: The Holy Book of Game* (New York: Penguin, 2005), defines "Captain Save a Hoe" as "a man who tries to earn the attention and affection of women by offering them support (often financial). This term derives from the hip-hop song 'Captain Save-a-Ho' by E-40" (v).
- ¹⁵ Leslie Jamison, "Pain Tours (I)," from her essay collection *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014). According to bell hooks, in "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance": "Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other" (371).
- ¹⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 67. Also, in the Preface of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), Moraga writes: "The exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched..." (xi).
- ¹⁷ The essay appears in James Baldwin's essay collection *Notes of a Native Son: Collected Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 101.
- ¹⁸ "To take a person's picture, to photograph or to sketch him, is to capture and steal his soul; if you reproduce a person's features you imprison and take away his spirit." (Rene Maunier, *The Sociology of Colonies: An Introduction to the Study of Race Contact*, Vol. 2, edited and translated by Emily Overend Lorimer [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1949, 2013], 473.
- ¹⁹ Garry Marshall, dir., *Valentine's Day*, 2010, New Line Cinema, Motion picture.
- ²⁰ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho And The Myth Of Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 13.
- ²¹ Malcolm X, Quoted in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: An African American Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 411.
- ²² Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 31.
- ²³ For information on the notion of "sounding Black" and linguistic profiling (using speech cues/vocalized patterns of speech to make conclusions about a person's race/ethnicity, and then discriminating on the person based on the assumed race/ethnicity), see John Baugh, "Linguistic Profiling," in *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas*, edited by Sinfree Makoni, Geneva Smitherman, Arentha F. Ball, and Arthur K. Spears (London: Routledge, 2003), 155-168; Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000); John McWhorter, "Thick of Tongue," *Guernica Magazine*, March 15,

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- 2016, <https://www.guernicamag.com/features/thick-of-tongue>; Thomas Purnell, William Idsardi and John Baugh, "Perceptual and Phonetic Experiments on American English Dialect Identification," *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, Vol. 18 (1999), 10-30; Lis Wiehl, "'Sounding Black' in the Courtroom: Court-Sanctioned Racial Stereotyping," *Harvard Blackletter Law Journal*, Vol. 18 (Spring 2002), 185-210 (Wiehl quotes a personal interview with Walt Wolfram, often hailed the national expert on dialectology, in which he states, "[v]irtually all judgment samples indicate that listeners can, in fact, identify African American speakers at levels of 80-90% accuracy. That is empirical data that has been replicated time and time again in studies over the last 30 years"); Frederick Williams, "Some Research Notes on Dialect Attitudes and Stereotypes," in *Language Attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects*, edited by Roger Shuy and Ralph Fasold (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1973), 113-128.
- ²⁴ Ice Cube, dir., *Player's Club*, New Line Cinema, 1998, DVD.
- ²⁵ For details on hierarchies in the adult entertainment industry, see Jenny Heineman, Rachel MacFarlane, and Barbara G. Brents, "Sex Industry and Sex Workers in Nevada," *The Social Health of Nevada: Leading Indicators and Quality of Life in the Silver State* (2012), 10-11; R. Barri Flowers, *Prostitution in the Digital Age: Selling Sex from the Suite to the Street* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2011).
- ²⁶ Caroline Knapp, *Drinking: A Love Story* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1996).
- ²⁷ Similarly, hip-hop historian and writer Kevin Powell writes: "Many of us men of color have held tightly to white patriarchal notions of manhood—that is, the way to be a man is to have power. Within hip-hop culture ... that power translates into material possessions, provocative and often foul language, flashes of violence, and blatant objectification of and disrespect for women. Patriarchy, as manifested in hip-hop, is where we can have our version of power within this very oppressive society." See Powell, "Confessions of a Recovering Misogynist," *Ms.*, April/May 2000, 77. See also Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnnetta B. Cole, "No Respect: Gender Politics And Hip-Hop," In *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality In African American Communities*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnnetta B. Cole (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 182-215. It is important to note, as hook acknowledges in "Sexism and misogyny: Who takes the rap? Misogyny, gangsta rap, and piano," *Z Magazine*, February 1994, that while feminist critiques of the misogyny in rap music must continue and that Black men should be held accountable for their sexism, the critique must be contextualized. hooks writes, "Without a doubt black males, young and old, must be held politically accountable for their sexism. Yet this critique must always be contextualized or we risk making it appear that the problems of misogyny, sexism, and all the behaviors this thinking supports and condones, including rape, male violence against women, is a black male thing" (116).
- ²⁸ bell hooks, in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), writes about the continuing impact of slavery on Black relationships, particularly the ways Black men treat Black women in her book *We Real Cool*: "...enslaved black males were socialized by white folks to believe that they should endeavor to become patriarchs by seeking to attain the freedom to provide and protect for black women, to be benevolent patriarchs. Benevolent patriarchs exercise their power without using force. And it was this notion of patriarchy that educated black men coming from slavery into freedom sought to mimic. However, a large majority of black men took as their standard the dominator model set by white masters. When slavery ended these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave masters used" (3-4). Patricia Hill Collins suggests, "these violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression" (146). Toni Cade Bambara condemns the silence of the black community, revealing how, "we rap about being correct but ignore the danger of having one half of our population regard the other with such condescension and perhaps fear that half finds it necessary to 'reclaim his manhood' by denying her her personhood" (125). Frances Beale accuses black men of using black women "as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous

system has perpetrated on black men” and points to the governmentally sponsored sterilization of non-white women as “outright surgical genocide” (116). Jeane Carey Bond and Patricia Peery ask “Is the Black male castrated?” and detail the problem with excusatory statements: “for the duration of their lives, many Black women must bear a heavy burden of male frustration and rage through physical abuse, desertions, rejection of their femininity and general appearance” (146). See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery, “Is the Black Male Castrated?” In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: New American Library, 1970); Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970); Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: New American Library, 1970).

²⁹ These disclaimers were taken from body rub and escort advertisements on the adult classified section of backpage.com, a popular classified advertising website.

³⁰ On the fictions of Black criminality and its role in shaping modern America, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010).

³¹ In 1984, critic Calvin Hernton, author of the controversial *Sex and Racism in America* (1965), published the article “The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers,” an expose of sexism within the Black literary establishment. Building on Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *Nation*, June 23, 1926, Hernton chronicles the beginning of the anti-Black feminist writers backlash within the Black community following the 1976 production of Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, followed by Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman*, and the difficult conditions under which Black women writers have worked and continue to work at the hands of Black men as well as white men: “Black men write a lot about the ‘castrating’ black female, and feel righteous in doing so. But when black women write ... that black men are castrators and oppressors of black women, black men accuse the women of sowing seeds of ‘division’ ... when black women write about the ... sisterhood of black women in their struggle for self-esteem, black men brand the women ‘feminist bitches.’ ... Meanwhile, there are black women writers, poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, scholars, researchers, intellectuals, politicians and ideologues ... wielding their pens like spades ... bringing forth rough new uncut literary jewels of their lives, in which are reflected for the first time the truer wages of our history and our conduct.” An updated version of the article was published in an 1987 book by the same name, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1987). According to Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* [New York: Routledge, 1990]), to talk develop analyses of sexuality that implicate Black men “violates norms of racial solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs second. Even within these racial boundaries, some topics are more acceptable than others—White men’s rape of Black women during slavery can be discussed whereas Black men’s rape of Black women today cannot” (124). Similarly, in her essay “Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out” (In *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, edited by Toni Morrison [New York: Pantheon, 1992]), Nellie McKay writes: In all of their lives in America ... black women have felt torn between the loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other. Choosing one or the other, of course, means taking sides against the self, yet they have almost always chosen race over the other: a sacrifice of their self-hood as women and of full humanity, in favor of the race” (277–78).

³² Alexa Albert, *Brothel: Mustang Ranch and Its Women* (New York: Random House, 2001).

³³ Stanley Kubrick, dir., *Full Metal Jacket*, Warner Brothers, 1987, Motion Picture.

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- ³⁴ On the relationship between sexual desire and racial prejudice, see Charles Herbert Stember, *Sexual Racism: The Emotional Barrier to an Integrated Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). Stember introduces the term “sexual racism,” which he defines as “the sexual rejection of the racial minority, the conscious attempt on the part of the majority to prevent interracial cohabitation” (ix). See also Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012); Jay P. Paul, George Ayala, and Kyung-Hee Choi, “Internet Sex Ads for MSM and Partner Selection Criteria: The Potency of Race/Ethnicity Online,” *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 47 (2010), 528-538; Denton Callander, Christy E. Newman, and Martin Holt, “Just a Preference: Racialised Language in the Sex-Seeking Profiles of Gay and Bisexual Men,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 14 (2012), 1049–1063.
- ³⁵ This follows along the lines of what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “sexualized racism.” Collins contends that the objectification of African American women as the “other” interferes with their relationships with ‘white’ and African American men. She explores “sexualized racism” to illustrate it as an institutionalized aspect of US society—an inherently racist society, where definitions of “normal” and “deviant” are taken for granted. According to Collins, African American female sexuality is viewed in US society as abnormal or pathological heterosexuality. In our “racially charged” society, Collins argues, African American females face a different form of heterosexism than gay or lesbian people and that is “sexualized racism.” The visibility of the Black body itself, she explains, signals sexual deviancy. She also contends that laws, which promoted racial segregation, such as those against interracial marriage, prevented African Americans and “whites” from seeing each other as friends, neighbors, or more importantly, as legal sexual partners. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- ³⁶ See, e.g., Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) (“Although most lynchings were inflicted in response to alleged murder, most of the rhetoric and justification focused intently on the so-called ‘one crime’ or ‘usual crime’: the sexual assault of white women by blacks. The assault sometimes involved rape, while other times a mere look or word was enough to justify death” [158].); James Harmon Chadbourne, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933); Winfield H. Collins, *The Truth About Lynching and the Negro in the South* (New York: Neale Publishing, 1918). Civil Rights activist and Journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who became prominent in the 1890s for bringing international attention to the lynching of African Americans, dedicated much of her work to refuting the prevailing white discourse of violent Black sexuality, which included deconstructing the “sacred myth of lynching: that it was done to protect the honor of white women” (Catherine R. Squires, *Dispatches from the Color Line: The Press and Multiracial America* [Albany, SUNY Press, 2007], 38). In her pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892), Wells-Barnett writes, “To palliate this record (which grows worse as he Afro-American becomes intelligent and excuse some of the most heinous crimes that ever stained the history of a country, the South is shielding itself behind the plausible screen of defending the honor of its women. This, too, in the face of the fact that only one-third of the 728 victims to mobs have been charged with rape, to say nothing of those of that one-third who were innocent of the charge ...” She also states, “The world knows that the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one.”
- ³⁷ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2003).
- ³⁸ Historian Winthrop D. Jordan notes that in white cultures the “concept of the Negro’s aggressive sexuality was reinforced by what was thought to be an anatomical peculiarity of the Negro male. He was said to possess an especially large penis.” White fascination with the Black penis bore itself out, according to Jordan, in the birth of the white male’s growing sense of sexual inadequacy during the colonial slave-owning period: “[W]hite

men anxious over their own sexual inadequacy were touched by a racking fear and jealousy. Perhaps the Negro better performed his nocturnal offices than the white man. Perhaps, indeed, the white man's woman really wanted the Negro more than she wanted him." [*The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 80]. Baldwin, in several essays, novels, speeches, and short stories, critically and creatively acknowledges the Black man's status as "walking phallic symbol." According to Trudier Harris, "Baldwin has long argued that the prevailing metaphor for understanding the white man's need to suppress the black man is that attached to sexual prowess [. . .]. [T]he white man becomes a victim of his culture's imagination, [. . .] acting out his fear of sexual competition from the black man" (*Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 20). Fanon, in *Black Skins, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), discusses the irreducibility of sexuality and race in his notion of Negrophobia, the absolute reduction, by white women, of the Negro to the genital: "In relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level" (157). Fanon continues, "All the Negrophobic women I have known had abnormal sex lives. Their husbands had left them; or they were widows and they were afraid to find a substitute for the dead husband; or they were divorced and they had doubts at the thought of a new object investment. All of them endowed the Negro with powers that other men (husbands, transient lovers) did not have" (158).

³⁹ "Speech of Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, March 23, 1900," *Congressional Record*, 56th Congress, 1st Session, 3223–3224. Reprinted in Richard Purday, editor, *Document Sets for the South in U. S. History* (Lexington, MA.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1991), 147.

⁴⁰ The nine church members killed were Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Tywanza Sanders, Sharonda Singleton, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lance, Susie Jackson, Reverend Daniel Simmons Sr., and DePayne Doctor. For details on the massacre and its connection to a long history of racial violence against African Americans, see Jamelle Bouie, "The Deadly History of 'They're Raping Our Women,'" *Slate*, June 18, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2015/06/the_deadly_history_of_t hey_re_raping_our_women_racists_have_long_defended.html.

⁴¹ On the relationship between sexual desire and racial prejudice, see Charles Herbert Stember, *Sexual Racism: The Emotional Barrier to an Integrated Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). Stember introduces the term "sexual racism," which he defines as "the sexual rejection of the racial minority, the conscious attempt on the part of the majority to prevent interracial cohabitation" (ix). See also Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012); Jay P. Paul, George Ayala, and Kyung-Hee Choi, "Internet Sex Ads for MSM and Partner Selection Criteria: The Potency of Race/Ethnicity Online," *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 47 (2010), 528-538; Denton Callander, Christy E. Newman, and Martin Holt, "Just a Preference: Racialised Language in the Sex-Seeking Profiles of Gay and Bisexual Men," *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 14 (2012), 1049–1063.

⁴² See, e.g., Samantha Allen, "'No Blacks' Is Not a Sexual Preference. It's Racism," *The Daily Beast*, Sept. 9, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/09/no-blacks-is-not-a-sexual-preference-it-s-racism.html>; Ritchie King, "The uncomfortable racial preferences revealed by online dating," *Quartz*, Nov. 20, 2013 <http://qz.com/149342/the-uncomfortable-racial-preferences-revealed-by-online-dating/> (After analyzing 2.4 million heterosexual interactions on the Facebook dating App Are You Interested (AYI), researchers found that "all men except Asians preferred Asian women, while all except black women preferred white men. And both black men and black women got the lowest response rates for their respective genders."); Yasmin Anwar, "In online dating, blacks more open to romancing whites than vice versa," *Berkeley News*, Feb. 11, 2011, <http://news.berkeley.edu/2011/02/11/onedating> ("According to the study, more than 80 percent of the online dating contacts initiated by whites were to other whites, with only 3 percent going to blacks. This trend held for both men and women, young and old.

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- Although black participants initiated contact to members of their own race more than to whites, they were ten times more likely to contact whites than vice versa, according the study.”); NPR Staff, “Online Dating Stats Reveal A ‘Dataclysm’ Of Telling Trends,” *All Things Considered Podcast*, Sept. 6, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/09/06/345884282/online-dating-stats-reveal-a-dataclysm-of-telling-trends> (“Black users, especially, there’s a bias against them,” according to OkCupid co-founder Christian Rudder. “Every kind of way you can measure their success on a site—how people rate them, how often they reply to their messages, how many messages they get—that’s all reduced.”).
- ⁴³ Denton Callander, Christy E. Newman, and Martin Holt, “Is Sexual Racism Really Racism? Distinguishing Attitudes Toward Sexual Racism and Generic Racism Among Gay and Bisexual Men,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 44, No. 7 (2015).
- ⁴⁴ James Baldwin, “Going to Meet the Man,” in his *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dial, 1965), 247-248.

III. DUALITY & THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF BLACK WOMANHOOD

- ¹ Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 94.
- ² Ava Duvernay, quoted in Trymaine Lee, “Director Ava DuVernay Talks Race, Hollywood and Doing It Her Way,” *NBC News*, Oct 6, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/director-ava-duvernay-talks-race-hollywood-doing-it-her-way-n439676>.
- ³ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011), 29.
- ⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 137.
- ⁵ This quote comes from W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903). Du Bois articulates the reality of being Black in America, stating: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (38).
- ⁶ Between news reports following the LA race riots and movies like *Boyz n the Hood*, *Friday*, and *Training Day*, South Central has been established over the decades as the epicenter of the Black experience in the popular imagination. These images have not only affected Blacks living in Los Angeles but throughout the country and beyond. The idea of South Central, according to Nancy Wang Yuen, became the lens through which much of the outside world—including the rest of Los Angeles—understood blackness in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. As a result, Black actors trying to make it in Hollywood struggle with an ongoing tension between the need to earn a living and achieve career goals and salvage their self-esteem. While they would prefer not to be typecast in ghetto roles in South Central, usually written by white writers in Hollywood with little knowledge about Black people outside of what they learned from other movies and shows, few Black actors have the luxury of simply passing up roles. According to Yuen’s study, “Playing ‘Ghetto’: Black Actors, Stereotypes, and Authenticity,” Black actors have developed creative coping strategies that distance, challenge, or avoid stereotypes ghetto roles in order to salvage their everyday lived identities and deal with shame and other feelings of guilt. Some distant their real-life persona from the ghetto characters they have to audition for and portray. Others use their lived realities to create a more authentic, multi-dimensional character, and from time-to-time black actors challenge the stereotypical portrayals of ghetto roles in their performances by altering the

- behavior and speech patterns of the characters or venturing outside of Hollywood to secure non-stereotyped roles. (233) Yuen concludes: "Black actors were not mere puppets in Hollywood, mindlessly conforming in their performances to the expected stereotypes ... they developed a variety of coping strategies to negotiate such roles and strived to make small, but meaningful, steps toward changing the popular image that blackness begins and ends with 'the hood'" (241). Nancy Wang, "Playing 'Ghetto': Black Actors, Stereotypes, and Authenticity," in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, edited by Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
- ⁷ Nina Hartley, "Bodhisattvas Among Us: Compassionate Sex Workers," In *Tricks and Treats: Sex Workers Write About Their Clients*, edited by Matt Bernstein Sycamore (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2000).
- ⁸ Flora Rheta Schreiber, *Sybil: The True and Extraordinary Story of a Woman Possessing Sixteen Separate Personalities* (New York: Warner Books, 1973).
- ⁹ In *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Charlotte Aull Davies notes that while the usual model for ethnographic interviewing is a dyadic interaction, it is not uncommon for others to be present, which changes the traditional one-on-one ethnographic interview into a form of group interview, which can have its own virtues. While it is possible that one person might dominate the conversation and control what is said, it is clear that the interaction between interviews can be very informative for the ethnographer. Furthermore, she writes "in interviews with more than one respondent, ethnographers frequently find they can be much less directive during the interview, in the sense of having to probe for more information on a given topic, as respondent often stimulate one another's responses and even pose questions to one another. Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999), 104. For an early example of the informal group interview process, see Paul Willis 1977 study of adolescent working-class boys from a school in Birmingham conducted between 1972 and 1975. Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough, Hants: Saxon House, 1977).
- ¹⁰ "Vanilla sex" refers to standard or conventional sexual behavior. See Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser, eds., *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures* (New York: Routledge, 2014). ("BDSM is separate from 'vanilla' sex. For most practitioners, BDSM activities and 'regular' sex—Intercourse, oral sex, etc., often called 'vanilla' sex within the kink community—are combined some or all of the time, and 'vanilla' sex can occur without BDSM.")
- ¹¹ BDSM—an acronym that stands in for bondage/discipline (B/D), domination/submission (D/S), and sadism/masochism or sadomasochism (S/M)—is a practice, identity, and community that centers on the eroticization of power dynamics," according to Sara Michelle Raab, "The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power Dynamics in BDSM: An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania," *Dickinson College Honors Theses*, Paper 50 (2013). For more about the terminology of BDSM, see Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011); Charles Moser and Peggy J. Kleinplatz, "Themes of SM Expression," In *Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by Darren Langdrige and Meg Barker (Houndmills, England and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Julia C. Tomassilli, et al., "Behind Closed Doors: An Exploration of Kinky Sexual Behaviors in Urban Lesbian and Bisexual Women," *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (2009).
- ¹² The men interviewed in Randi Klein, "Why Do I Cross Dress? Insights and Comments From 12 Cross-dressers," *Light in the Closet*, <http://www.lightinthecloset.org/WhyDoICrossdress.html> make similar remarks as to why they crossdress. Mark S., also known as Mary, for example, states, "By my cross-dressing I seek not to endanger any person. I seek only to discover more of myself and to create a safe environment to experiment in." James M., also known as Natalie, says, "When I dress as a woman I am expressing the maternal softness and vulnerability that I

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- find within myself (softness that I usually conceal and am embarrassed of). I cross-dressed, instinctively in my youth and then purposely in my senior years, to form a more perfect union of all that is me.”
- ¹³ The term gender trouble alludes to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism And The Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), in which she argues: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25).
- ¹⁴ The central mottos of the SM community are “safe, sane, and consensual” and “RACK” (Risk Aware Consensual Kink). According to Sara Michelle Raab, “These slogans exemplify the importance the SM community places on practices of negotiation, communication, and consent in order to ensure that all activity is safe and to facilitate a pleasurable experience. These general guidelines of the SM community help to create a ‘safe space.’” See Raab, “The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power Dynamics in BDSM: An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania,” *Dickinson College Honors Theses*, Paper 50 (2013). For information on SM communities as safe spaces to explore gender, see Robin Bauer, “Playgrounds and New Territories—The Potential of BDSM Practices to Queer Genders,” In *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadoomasochism*, edited by Darren Langdridge and Meg Barker (Houndmills England and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Studying the dyke + SM community in the U.S. and Western Europe, Bauer finds that such communities create a safe space to explore genders, which allows for “an expansion of gender concepts and identities” as well as the “valuing of gender diversity” (177, 191). In “Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of the Dyke/Trans BDSM Community,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, Nos. 3-4 (2008), Bauer also finds that the body is “perceived as more performative than in mainstream culture” and theorizes that the exploration and transgression of socially hierarchical roles such as gender within the community are largely due to members’ lack of straight privilege (247-248).
- ¹⁵ See Daisy Hernandez, “Playing with Race,” *Colorlines Magazine*, Dec. 21, 2004, http://colorlines.com/archives/2004/12/playing_with_race.htm. Hernandez interviews members of the BDSM community about race talk. According to a Black woman named Chupoo, the racism within the BDSM community is evidenced in the men who approach her. (“I get more white sub[missive] men hitting on me than anything else,” she says. They’re hoping she’ll be a big, black dominant woman. ‘It’s their thing. It’s their racist fantasies of what black people are.’”)
- ¹⁶ Recognizing the labor and play components of sexuality itself, Margot Weiss conceptualizes BDSM as “working at play”, a kind of fluid movement “between the registers of work (productive labor) and play (as creative recombination).” See Margot Weiss, “Working at Play: BDSM Sexuality in the San Francisco Bay Area,” *Anthropologica*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2006), 230.
- ¹⁷ For information on the differences between American and European sex-education and the benefits of non-sexual physical touch, see Anna Pulley, “American Sex Norms Europeans Probably Think Are Insane,” *Alternet*, July 10, 2015, <http://challengewww.alternet.org/sex-amp-relationships/5-american-sex-norms-europeans-probably-think-are-insane> (“We have spent billions on abstinence-only education programs that spread misinformation and shame teenagers into thinking sex is dirty and will ruin their lives forever. And instead of curbing the number of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, the opposite happens. Compared to European countries, most of which boast comprehensive sex ed, easy access to birth control and universal healthcare, the U.S. has alarming teen pregnancy rates—41.5 per 1,000 people, as reported by the United Nations in 2009 ... Despite this knowledge, and our hyper-sexualized tendencies, America is one of the most touch-phobic countries in the world. A global study on touch rated the United States among ‘the lowest touch countries studied.’”)

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- ¹⁸ Mark Williams, "Entertaining 'Difference': Strains of Orientalism in Early Los Angeles Television," In *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, edited by Sasha Torres (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998).
- ¹⁹ In *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, John L. Jackson, Jr. offers an in-depth analysis of race and the performance of blackness. He encourages a wholesale move away from any notion of racial authenticity as objectifying and to move toward a notion of racial sincerity. He writes, "A mere object could never be sincere, even if it is authentic. ... Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another's humanity, interiority, and subjectivity" (15). Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). E. Patrick Johnson suggests that the performance and perception of racial authenticity is merely a tool of cultural capital, decidedly overdetermined and problematically defined by white people. See Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003). For information regarding the politics of authenticity as it relates particularly to Hawaii, see Rona Tamiko Halualani, "Connecting Hawaiians: The Politics of Authenticity in the Hawaiian Diaspora," in *Intercultural Alliances: Critical Transformation*, edited by Mary Jane Collier (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003), 221-248.
- ²⁰ Writer and BDSM educator Mollena Williams defines race play, "in broad terms, as any type of play that openly embraces and explores the (either "real" or assumed) racial identity of the players within the context of a BDSM scene. The prime motive in a 'Race Play' scene is to underscore and investigate the challenges of racial or cultural differences. See Williams, "Race Play Interview – Part I," April 6, 2009, <http://www.mollena.com/2009/04/race-play-interview-part-1/>.
- ²¹ For details on the racial dynamics of BDSM, see Ariane Cruz, "Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2015), 409-436; Viola M. Johnson, "Playing With Racial Stereotypes The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name," *Black Leather...in Color*, edited by Lidell Jackson Antoinette and S. Guy Giumento, No. 4 (Fall 1994), is reproduced on the weblog *Leatherweb*, <http://www.leatherweb.com/raceplayh.htm>. As noted by Cruz, such understandings of "the complexity of women's sexuality attentive to the critical tension between sexual pleasure and violence owes much to the trailblazing work of Carol Vance." See Carol Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 1-27.
- ²² Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin, writing in 1984, describes popular sexual ideology as being based on a hierarchical value system, "the charmed circle," depicting some sex acts thought of as "good" (e.g. monogamous, procreative, vanilla, coupled, heterosexual) and their opposites as "bad" (promiscuous, non-procreative, SM, alone or in groups, homosexual). Rubin points out that engaging in sexual behaviors that are considered "bad," comes with a number of manifestations of the social stigma, including presumption of mental illness, criminality, loss of institutional support and economic sanctions. Sadomasochism and fetishism, both prevalent in SM, are "quite firmly entrenched as psychological malfunctions." See Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory on the Politics of Sexuality," In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 152-155. Individuals who engage in BDSM have historically been subject to reproach, particularly stemming from the psychiatric community. Richard Krafft-Ebing, the nineteenth-century sex researcher credited with coining the term "sadomasochism," for instance, described the practice as both a "perversion" and an "affliction." This pathologizing attitude continues today with medical and psychiatric discourse, as well as the Othering of BDSM in television and movies such as *Law and Order* and *50 Shades of Grey*. See Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex* (New York: Arcade, 2011 [1886]), 53; Danielle J. Lindemann, *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon*

- (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lewis Call, *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- ²³ Diablo Cody, prod., *United States of Tara*, Showtime Networks, 2009. TV.
- ²⁴ For a detailed analysis of the ways in which gender-power dynamics are perpetuated and subverted in BDSM, see Sara Michelle Raab, "The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power Dynamics in BDSM: An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania," *Dickinson College Honors Theses*, Paper 50 (2013); Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011). Weiss, as noted by Raab, "makes a complex argument supporting notions that normative gender roles are perpetuated in SM. She argues that SM performances work within social norms rather than creating a space of freedom from them (6). She makes this argument when writing about her research that examines the Bay Area SM community through a social analysis of its racialized, gendered, and capitalist dynamics (6). The crux of her argument is that SM performances would look very different if they did not exist within a racist, capitalist, patriarchal society; the performances are inextricable from cultural hierarchies and in fact, reproduce such social relations (18; 33). Her claims lend support to the notion that SM perpetuates normative dynamics, although she frames her argument in a rejection of reading 'SM on a formal dichotomy between transgression and reification of social hierarchies,' indicating that SM has the potential subvert and perpetuate hegemony simultaneously (24)."
- ²⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed. (DSM-III) (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association Press, 1980). DID is defined as "the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states...that recurrently take control of behavior" by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.
- ²⁶ A 1994 study found that 24% of mental health professionals are either moderately or extremely skeptical of the disorder's existence. Paul Dell, "Professional Skepticism About Multiple Personality," *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, Vol. 176. No. 9 (Oct. 1988), 528-31.
- ²⁷ Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).
- ²⁸ Daniel Petrie, dir. *Sybil*, Warner Home Video, 1976, DVD; Nunnally Johnson, dir., *The Three Faces of Eve*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1957, DVD; Corbett Thigpen and Hervey Cleckley, *The Three Faces of Eve* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957).
- ²⁹ For information on the popularity of *Sybil* and its relation to MPD, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Herbert Spiegel, "Sybil: The Making of a Disease? An interview with Dr. Herbert Spiegel," *New York Review of Books*, April 24, 1997, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/04/24/sybil-the-making-of-a-disease/>.
- ³⁰ Joan Acocella, *Creating Hysteria: Women and Multiple Personality Disorder* (San Francisco: Jossey-Base Publishers, 1999), 4-6.
- ³¹ For information on the history of women and madness, see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987); Elaine Showalter, 'Victorian Women and Insanity', *Victorian Studies*, 23 (1979-80), 157-81, duplicated in *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, edited by Andrew Scul (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 313-36; Nancy M. Theriot, "Women's Voices in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse: A Step toward Deconstructing Science," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 19 (1993), 1-31; Joan Busfield, *Men, Women and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton University Press, 1995); C. Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th Century America," *Social Research*, Vol. 39 (1979), 652-78 and reprinted in C. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford UP, 1985), 197-216; Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

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- ³² For example, the first MPD movie, *Three Faces of Eve*, about a meek housewife and mother with three personalities that allow her to escape her unhappy marriage, was released in 1957, a time when women were growing more and more discontent with domesticity. See Maia Szalavitz, "The Truth About 'Sybil': Q&A with Author Debbie Nathan," *Time*, Dec. 28, 2011, <http://healthland.time.com/2011/12/28/the-truth-about-sybil-qa-with-author-debbie-nathan/>.
- ³³ Katherine J. Lehman, "Woman, Divided: Gender, Family, and Multiple Personalities in Media," *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2014): 64-73.
- ³⁴ "Diablo Cody Discusses Tara's Alters," *Showtime Networks*, 2008. <http://www.sho.com/video/9351/diablo-cody-discusses-taras-alters>.

IV. NAVIGATING AND NARRATING STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL: MANAGING EROTIC LABOR THROUGH FEMALE FRIENDSHIP, SPIRITUALITY, STORYTELLING, AND HUMOR

- ¹ Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1991).
- ² Nicole A. Woelz-Stirling, Margaret Kelaher, Lenore Manderson, "Power And The Politics Of Abuse: Rethinking Violence In Filipina-Australian Marriages," *Health Care For Women International*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1998): 289-301.
- ³ Billie Holiday And Arthur Herzog, Jr., *God Bless The Child* (Edward B. Marks Music Co., 1941).
- ⁴ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (London: Vintage, 1988), 3.
- ⁵ Dennis Covington, *Salvation On Sand Mountain: Snake-Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Press, 1995).
- ⁶ Quoted in Bill Muehlenberg, "Difficult Bible Passages: Mark 16:17-18," *Culture Watch*, June 2, 2012, <https://billmuehlenberg.com/2012/06/02/difficult-bible-passages-mark-1617-18/>.
- ⁷ At least five serial killers—and these are just the ones who've been caught—prowled South Los Angeles in the '80s and '90s, raping, torturing, and killing mostly young Black women, dumping their bodies in parks, alleys, vacant buildings, and roadsides. Between 1984 and 2007, authorities found the bodies of 55 victims, some only blocks away from the Office. Since the late 1970s at least ten serial killers, possibly more, have been active in Los Angeles area alone. Many of these killers targeted, in the words of a 2010 Times' Homicide Report, "mostly young African American women, dumping their bodies in alleys, vacant buildings or parks." The "Southside Slayer" (born Michael Hughes) was convicted for the murders of seven girls and women during the late 80s and early 90s, and is believed to be responsible for several others. Their bodies, most strangled and stabbed, were found dumped in alleys and on streets in the Los Angeles area. In July 2010 Lonnie Franklin, Jr., dubbed "the Grim Sleeper" for a supposed 14-year hiatus he took between his killing sprees, joined the roster of Los Angeles' most prolific serial killers, which includes Charles Manson, "Night Stalker" Richard Ramirez and "Freeway Killer" William Bonin. Franklin was charged with the murders of ten women—all but one were Black and many were involved in sex work—between 1985 and 2007. All of his victims were found outdoors, a few miles from downtown Los Angeles. He would have sexual contact with the victims before strangling or shooting them with a .25 caliber. In May 2007, the murder of a 25-year-old Black woman, Janecia Peters, was linked through DNA analysis to at least eleven unsolved murders in LA dating back to '85. A task force of seven detectives was formed in secret to solve the murder mystery, and after a four-month investigation the *LA Weekly* investigative reporter broke the news of the task force's existence and the silence of the mayor and police chief regarding the killer's existence. The community was never warned; in some cases, *LA Weekly* was the first to inform the families that their daughters had long been confirmed as victims of a serial killer. See Dennis Romero, "5 SoCal Serial Killers Still on the Loose," *LA Weekly*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/5-socal-serial-killers-still-on-the-loose-7141598>; Seth Kelley, "18 Los Angeles Serial Killers who Terrorized the City," *TimeOut*, Nov. 11, 2015, <https://www.timeout.com/los-angeles/los-angeles-serial-killers-who-terrorized-the->

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- city; Crimesider Staff, "L.A.'s 'Southside Slayer' Michael Hughes Convicted of Three More Murders," *CBS News*, Nov. 4, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/las-southside-slayer-michael-hughes-convicted-of-three-more-murders/>.
- ⁸ Alice Walker, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010).
- ⁹ For more information on felon disenfranchisement, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010). ("In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.")
- ¹⁰ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *Life Lessons: Two Experts On Death And Dying Teach Us About The Mysteries Of Life And Living* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 17.
- ¹¹ Alice Walker, "In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism, Volume 2*, edited by Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005 [1973]), 93; Virginia Woolf, "A Room Of One's Own" in *The Norton Anthology Of Western Literature*, 8th ed., edited by Heather James et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2006), 1925-1956.
- ¹² William S. Burroughs, *BrainyQuotes*, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/williamsb378626.html>.
- ¹³ Young Jeezy, "Everythang," *TM: 103 Hustlerz Ambition*, 2011, Def Jam Records/CTE, CD.
- ¹⁴ Kendrick Lamar, "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)," *Section.80*, 2011, Top Dawg, CD.
- ¹⁵ I once read that one-third of children living in urban neighborhoods throughout the U.S. have PTSD—nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq. According to recent research and the country's top child trauma experts, most of these children are exposed to recurrent trauma: community violence, murder, assault, a separate and unequal way of life that leaves them prone to structural violence, living in chronically unsafe or hostile environments. And like the forming of a sedimentary rock, layer after layer gradually building up over time, the trauma accumulates in the mind and develops into PTSD—nicknamed "Hood Disease." America's urban youth are not considered children but survivors of urban warfare. But it's not restricted to children in urban war zones. The reality of simply being Black in America can also cause PTSD. Psychological and psychiatric organizations such as the APA have noted that sustained racism and discrimination can be emotionally taxing on minority communities, that we can even become stressed just from the anticipation of becoming stressed. What they call anticipatory race-related stress. Not only does racism result in unwarranted arrests and death and discrimination, it perpetuates our anxieties, actively produces stress and causes trauma for those exposed, leads us to be constantly vigilant—exhibiting "cultural paranoia"—puts us at an elevated risk for chronic illnesses like diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular heart disease, forces us to fight daily what has come to be known as "racial battle fatigue" since, according to *PsychCentral*, exposure to racial discrimination is akin to the constant pressure soldiers face on the battlefield. In short, we are living—and slowly dying—in the words of Claudia Rankine, because "white men can't police their imagination." See Isaac Riddle, "In War and on City Streets, the Similar Threat of PTSD," *Next City*, Feb. 11, 2013, <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/in-war-and-on-city-streets-the-similar-threat-of-ptsd>; Rick Nauert, "'Race Battle Fatigue' Seems to Fuel Anxiety Among African-Americans," *PsychCentral*, March 4, 2011,

- <http://psychcentral.com/news/2011/03/04/racial-battle-fatigue-seems-to-fuel-anxiety-disorder-among-african-americans/24132.html>; Claudia Rankine, quoted in Kate Kellaway, "Claudia Rankine: 'Blackness in the white imagination has nothing to do with black people,'" *The Guardian*, Dec. 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/27/claudia-rankine-poet-citizen-american-lyric-feature>.
- ¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Plume Books, 1992), 113.
- ¹⁷ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," *The Granta Book of the American Short Story*, edited by Richard Ford (London: Granta Books, 1998), 193.
- ¹⁸ Ira Glass, quoted in Jordan Zakarin, "Ira Glass on 'This American Life,' Killing Big Bird and the Rules of Storytelling," *The Hollywood Reporter*, Nov. 26, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ira-glass-american-life-killing-393930>.
- ¹⁹ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, edited by Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Quoted in Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1994), 126.
- ²⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 26.
- ²¹ As Evelyn M. Hammonds points out in her canonical essay "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997): "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized" (171). In her article, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999) Hammonds adds that silence is a multigenerational price to pay for an acceptance that never came, regarding Black women in the United States.
- ²² Toni Morrison uses the phrase "unspeakable things unspoken" to describe Black women's sexuality in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," a speech that she delivered at the University of Michigan in 1988 and published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1989), 1-34.
- ²³ For more on the history of Black women's silence and the culture of dissemblance, see Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1989), 912-920. For more on Black female slave sexual assault and its aftermath, see Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987); Ann duCille, "'Othered' Matters: Reconceptualizing Dominance and Difference in the History of Sexuality in America," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1990), 102-27; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Imaging Lynching: African American Women, Communities of Struggle, and Collective Memory," In *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas*, edited by Geneva Smitherman (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 100-24; and Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness As Property," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 106, No. 8 (June 1993), 1707-91.
- ²⁴ I also discuss "going native" in the Introduction. As noted earlier, according to Karen O'Reilly, in "Going 'Native,'" In *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), the term refers to "the danger for ethnographers to become too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance" (87). While there are those that maintain that "going native," especially in the sex industry, jeopardizes the professional status of the researcher (Angie Hart, *Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological Reflections on Prostitution in Spain* [Oxford: Westview Press, 1998], 55), others have used complete participation as the key to the insider status. For example, Stephanie Wahab, in "Creating Knowledge Collaboratively with Female Sex

Workers: Insights from a Qualitative, Feminist, and Participatory Study,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 9, describes how she not only conducted observations in strip clubs but decided to engage in the sex work venue. Encouraged by her participants who insisted that to really understand the job it had to be lived, she took part in a peep show as a dancer, immersing herself in the context of the culture.

- ²⁵ Jhumpa Lahiri, “Trading Stories: Notes From an Apprenticeship,” *New Yorker*, June 13 & 20, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/06/13/trading-stories>.

NOTES FROM CONCLUSION

- ¹ Stephen Thayer, “History and Strategies of Research on Social Touch,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, Vol. 10 (1986), 8.
- ² Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- ³ Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).
- ⁴ Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *Du Bois Review*, Vol. 1 (2004), 33.
- ⁵ Matthew J. Hertenstein, Julie M. Verkamp, Alyssa M. Kerestes, & Rachel M. Holmes, “The Communicative Functions of Touch in Humans, Nonhuman Primates, and Rats: A Review and Synthesis of the Empirical Research,” *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, Vol. 132, No. 1, (2006), 5.
- ⁶ Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 100.